

The New Criterion

June 1988

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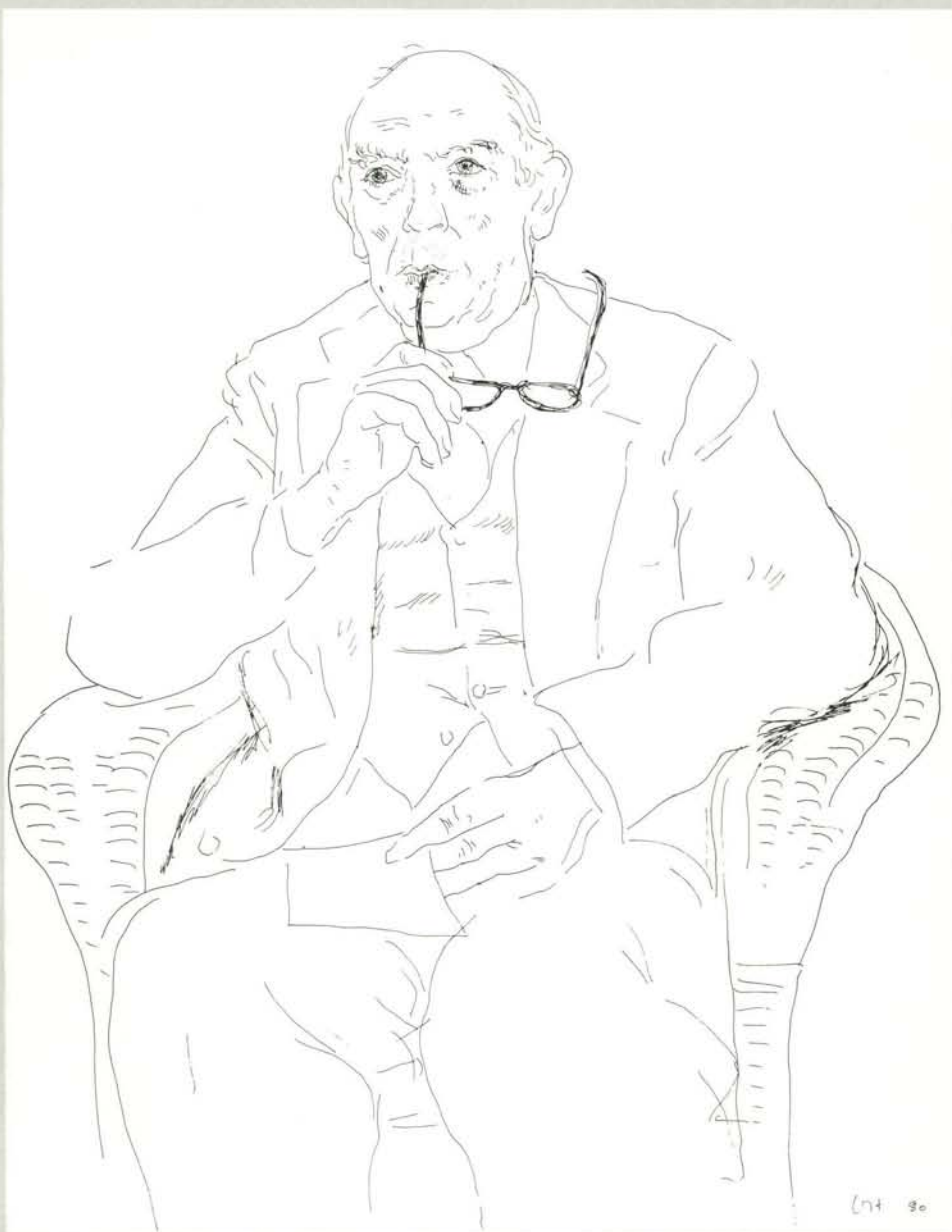
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David Gress's article, "Talking 'Terrorism,'" was published in our April issue.

Walter Griffin's poetry has appeared in *Harper's*.

Jeffrey Harrison's book of poems, *The Singing Underneath*, has just been published by E. P. Dutton.

Roger Kimball wrote on Geoffrey Hartman for the May issue of *The New Criterion*.

Samuel Lipman is the author of *Music After Modernism* and *The House of Music*.

Jed Perl's book, *Paris Without End*, will be published by North Point Press in the fall.

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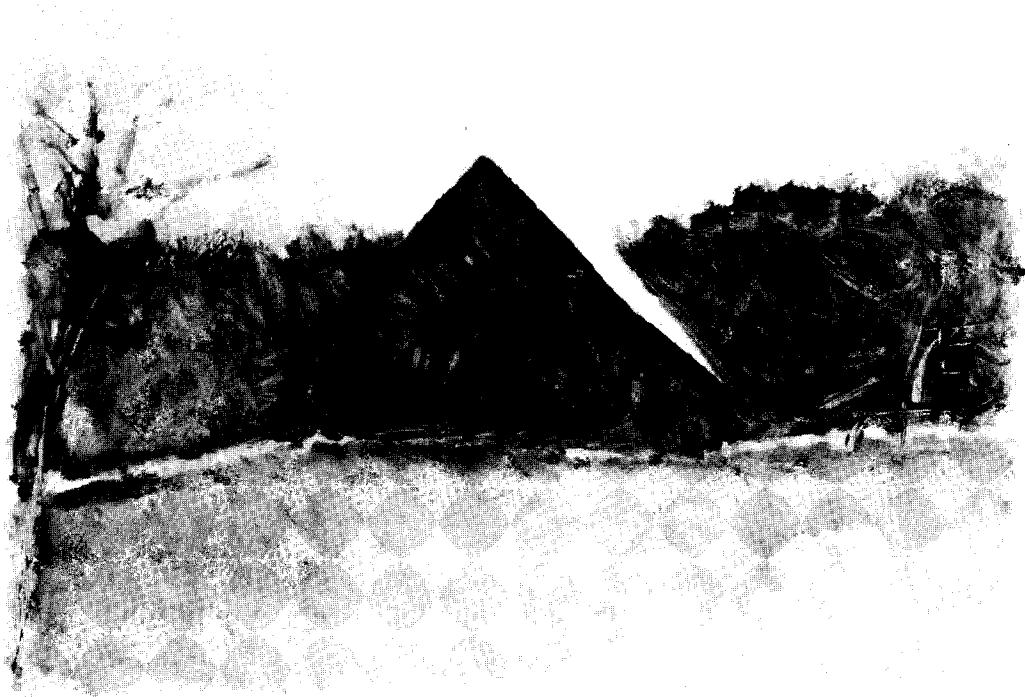
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Music and the good life

*by Joseph W. Polisi and James Sloan Allen,
with a reply from Samuel Lipman*

As our readers—and music lovers everywhere—are aware, the world of serious music seems increasingly beset by an atmosphere of concern about music's present and future. In this connection, we published in our December 1987 issue Samuel Lipman's review of Judith Kogan's Nothing But the Best, a book about the Juilliard School in New York. In his review, Mr. Lipman found that "the emptiness of a Juilliard education is no more than the emptiness of most lives in music." It was therefore with much interest that we received an article written by Joseph W. Polisi, the President of Juilliard, and James Sloan Allen, Director of Liberal Arts and Academic Administration at the school. Because this article raised important issues, we are now publishing it, along with a reply by Mr. Lipman.—The Editors

Institutions dedicated to the performance and teaching of classical music are taking some pretty hard knocks these days. Articles appear almost weekly on the death or otherwise grave condition of most "serious music" by music critics of *The New York Times*; we hear perennial knells for the moribund solo recital; frequent denunciations are hurled at the decrepit programming of symphony orchestras, as regional orchestras fold their tents for want of support; in a widely publicized speech, Ernest Fleischmann, the Executive Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Association, pronounced the symphony orchestra as an institution all but dead (recalling Gunther

Schuller's worries of a decade ago). And, as readers of this journal know, Samuel Lipman never misses a chance to bewail the sorry condition of professional musical education in America and of the classical musical culture in general. According to Mr. Lipman—in a recent review in *The New Criterion* (December, 1987) that was echoed in a public symposium on classical music sponsored by *The New Criterion* and the Ninety-second Street YM-YWHA—classical musicians are doomed to a "joyless life" pursuing nothing but "glamour and success"; and the music schools are symptoms of this professional "disease" wherein aspiring artists are oppressively conditioned for "the emptiness of most lives in music."

Such bleak perceptions must be discouraging to aspiring musicians nowadays—as they are no doubt meant to be. And that may not be a bad thing, since many people aspire to be musicians who shouldn't.

But effects aside, for all their urgent contemporaneity, these opinions are not new. They are as old as Western musical culture itself. At the very dawn of this culture, Aristotle had warned the Athenians against becoming professional musicians lest they be mere "hirelings" and "mechanics" and not complete human beings. And, to take another emblematic example, at the end of the nineteenth century, Tolstoy powerfully excoriated the professionalization of the arts, and the attendant creation of conservatory training, for producing in professional

artists nothing but slavish technicians bereft of feeling and humanity and therefore incapable of serving the true ends of art, which for Tolstoy were the sharing of universal human emotions.

But if today's negative perceptions of professional musicians are not new, they nonetheless warrant reflection. For they do not just concern the state of a single profession. They address these important and venerable questions: Does art make life better? Does it make people better? If so, how? And if not, why not? Everyone involved in the advancement of the arts, and certainly those responsible for general and professional arts education, should try to answer them.

The answers will not be simple ones. They will probably be contradictory. On the one hand, most people accept the commonplace assumption of liberal education which holds that art improves people and their lives by providing salutary emotional, sensory, and imaginative satisfactions, and it might even expand people's powers to experience such satisfactions. This assumption long ago prompted the introduction of arts education into the general curriculum.

But even if the assumption is true—and it appears on shaky ground these days as evidenced by the decline of music education in the public schools—it is doubtful that art necessarily makes people better, if we mean by this more humane or ethically sensitive. There have, to be sure, been many thinkers who have thought it did, or could. The Greeks considered ethics and aesthetics to be one; hence they placed arts education at the heart of all education, believing that art shapes character for good or ill. Romantics like Wordsworth and Shelley, Goethe and Schiller, saw in aesthetic education the path to both humanism and humanitarianism (a useful distinction that goes back to antiquity). And both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky attributed to art redemptive powers, Tolstoy imagining that true art could unite mankind, and Dostoevsky stating simply that “beauty will save the world.”

Notwithstanding this affirming tradition, if art by its nature made people better, the

world would be a better place, and artists would be the best of people, which, to our continuing disappointment, they are not. Denis Diderot gave this disappointment historic expression in *Rameau's Nephew* when he had the narrator ask Rameau's nephew, who is a musician, “How is it that with your remarkable sensitivity to the beauties of the musical art, you are so blind to the fine things of morality, so insensitive to the charms of virtue?” and then had the nephew reply: “I have always lived with good musicians and bad people. Hence it has come about that my ear has become very sharp and my heart very deaf.”

That art can sharpen the ear and deafen the heart is all too true, and a truth that should disturb everyone involved in the arts, and especially those in the business of training young artists. For if art does not improve life, it cannot be worth the sacrifices it demands. And if it actually makes people and their lives worse, we had better run it out of town, as Plato had recommended doing with most art.

Why doesn't art make people and their lives better? There are many reasons, but chief among them—as implied by Diderot—is that art and ethics seem to have nothing much to do with each other anymore. For example, ask Juilliard students what they take to be the purpose of art, and the answer will usually be: personal enjoyment. Ask them, “What is the relation between art and ethics?” or, to put it another way, “What is the social or moral responsibility of the artist?” and you will be met, at first, by uncomprehending blank looks and a dismissal of the presumptions of the question. This is not the students' fault. It is the fault of a culture that has long since divorced art and ethics and reduced (elevated?) art to an instrument of personal pleasure, a product of disembodied formalism, or just another commercial enterprise. How can young artists be expected to see moral responsibility in art when virtually no one else does? And how can art ever make people better if artists themselves don't see the connection between art and ethics, much less promote it?

To enable people to associate art and ethics should be one of the aims of general education; and it should be a primary aim of professional arts education. To do this, schools must at least expose students to the ideas that have marked the debate on the nature and purposes of art from antiquity onwards. And art students should have to articulate and justify their own positions in that debate. They should also have to grapple with such issues as the relations between ethics and human nature, freedom and responsibility, autonomy and ambition (Juilliard undergraduates must now do all of these).

The success of these and other ways of giving art a larger role in improving people and their lives depends in part on the kind of people who are experiencing art—young or old, privileged or deprived, audiences or performers. When those people are aspiring performers of the type who attend Juilliard and similar institutions, it is necessary to understand the unique conditions in which their art and lives mix.

Art gives these young people many potential advantages, but it also carries potential dangers—the kind that critics have cautioned against for centuries. These potential advantages and dangers shape the artistic personality (most conspicuously in music, where they appear earliest) and ultimately the artistic culture within which art either serves or betrays its humanistic purposes.

The first of these advantages, at once obvious and usually ignored in criticisms of aspiring performers and those who train them, is talent. Talent is a form of power, the natural power to do something very well. And it gives its possessor the self-confidence and willpower to pursue high achievement unconditionally. This is the very kind of self-confident ambition that most parents pray their children will develop.

But, like all forms of power, a talent of any kind brings perils. These are the narcissism and arrogance that blind artists to others' interests and can breed a disdain for common civility and ethical responsibility. It is here that art (no less than any other activ-

ity) fails to make people better. If educators and society at large would marry this talent to social conscience rather than to shallow self-interest, art would better serve artists and others. The trick is how to do this while encouraging a young person's artistic powers and self-confidence.

Another advantage is self-discipline. Because of their talent and self-confidence, coupled with the extraordinary technical demands made upon them by their artistic training, young performing artists (again, musicians are the exemplars) must be self-disciplined beyond their years—more even than most other gifted young people who have yet to find their vocations. Not for them the idle hours, indirection, malingerings, and ennui of many other undergraduates whose indiscipline and self-indulgence all too often lead to self-destructive behavior. Serious performing arts students have committed themselves to a career that requires arduous self-control. Without this self-control they cannot hope to master the skills they need. Their existence is energized and focused by this commitment in ways that most parents would (and do) spend fortunes to cultivate in their children. (Some schools outside the professional arts community, like St. Augustine's in New York's impoverished South Bronx, have discovered the worth of musical training as a means of teaching self-discipline.)

Such admirable, sometimes inspiring, self-discipline and determination do bring risks. One of these is a narrowing of perspective that can attenuate development—some young artists convince themselves that they need no general education or social skills, so they remain ignorant of anything but their art. Another is the naïve assumption that talent and discipline are automatically rewarded and life thereby made easy; under this assumption, young artists can become incapacitated for dealing with the vagaries of professional life.

To avoid these risks, artists must widen their range of vision and professional versatility without diminishing their artistic self-discipline. And this can be done only by a

vigorous general education and a demanding regimen of practical experience.

The third advantage has to do with motivation. In this time of fevered vocationalism and financial ambition, ask a Juilliard student if he or she is pursuing a career in the arts for fame and fortune and you will likely hear raucous laughter. Unlike many of their peers in liberal arts colleges, and contrary to the caricatures of the egocentric soloist, it is not the money or the fame, which are mighty scarce, that motivate these young performers. It is usually the joy of presenting their art, and of sharing that joy with others. If they could afford it, most say they would work at being artists for nothing—as many of them no doubt will, from necessity. How many young people in other professions can say that of their lives?

But this worthy humanistic ambition also has its drawbacks. To work for joy or pleasure rather than for more practical, less delightful ends can induce the expectation that all pursuits must yield pleasure, and that personal pleasure is the sole end of art. These expectations do an injustice to both life and art. In many ways, life is harder than art, and it takes a severe toll on artists not prepared for its frustrations, hardships, and banal material exigencies. All too often the result of these thwarted expectations is bitterness and resentment at a world that does not give the artist his or her due, and this can lead to downright vicious behavior. At the same time, to reduce art to personal pleasure is to trivialize it and diminish its power to do good. For this trivialization makes art an incidental and insignificant diversion or idle entertainment.

Aspiring artists must therefore be prepared for the lives they will lead in the real world, alert to its difficulties and imbued with the resiliency to overcome them. And they must be made to see the uses of art beyond pleasure, uses for themselves and others. Nevertheless, they should also be encouraged to preserve the pristine motive of working for the love of their art.

There are, to be sure, many other characteristics of the aspiring artist. But these few

will suffice to underscore the truth that art does not in itself make people better. It can only do so when experienced as part of an understanding of the proper relation between art and life. Performing artists achieve this when they use their talent to bring confidence and joy to themselves and others by expanding people's emotional and sensory and imaginative range; they achieve it when their self-discipline yields accomplishment and growth and the courage to explore ideas and experiences beyond art; and they achieve it when their love of art transcends pleasure and fosters a generosity of spirit and sensitivity to human welfare.

Art can make life better, and it should make people better, artists no less than other people. But this will happen only if the appropriate place of art in the lives of artists—and in the life of culture—is openly examined by all who have a stake in the outcome. This means not only artists and art educators but everybody.

In sum, we should stop considering art a plaything of artists and audiences, teachers and critics. It is one of the strongest sinews of culture and character, for both good and bad. Artists belie this when they equate art with their own pleasure. Audiences mistake it when they seek in art only easy entertainment. Teachers violate it when they treat art as a purely formal or technical exercise. Critics betray it when they casually condemn the state of art without looking into art's human purposes and how those can be achieved.

Art is a social institution, whether we like it or not. What we need now is a tough-minded commitment by artists, educators, critics, financiers, politicians, and everyone else to treat that institution with the seriousness it deserves, and make it work for us instead of against us.

Reply from Samuel Lipman

Before getting on to the basic issues raised by Mr. Polisi and Mr. Allen, two housekeeping details should be attended to, so that the immediate stimuli which gave

rise to their article might not be obscured by incomplete citation. The most thorough statements by the *New York Times* music critics about the present situation of classical music are contained in a round-table discussion that was published in the paper on January 31, 1988. My most recent "bewail[ing] of the sorry condition of professional music education in America" is presumably my review of *Nothing But the Best*, Judith Kogan's widely read and devastating attack on the Juilliard School. And the "public symposium on classical music" to which Mr. Polisi and Mr. Allen refer took place in November, 1987, at New York's Ninety-second Street YM-YWHA; it was printed (in an edited and shortened version) in the March and April issues of *Keynote*, the program guide and magazine of WNCN, a classical music station in New York.

I suppose, too, that it might be best at the outset to clear the air about Mr. Polisi's and Mr. Allen's observation that the "bleak perceptions" by myself and many others about the musical present "must be discouraging to aspiring musicians nowadays—as they are no doubt meant to be." While I can hardly speak for others, so far as I am concerned I intend in my writing to discourage no one from finding beauty and truth in the marvelous music to which it is our privilege to devote our lives. It is my hope that what I write, far from discouraging musicians and listeners, will *encourage* them to create a vital musical life. In any case, no putatively discouraging words from a critic can possibly compete with the discouraging atmosphere widely perceived as emanating from musical life and education today. For Mr. Polisi and Mr. Allen to concentrate their attention on critics they deem to be misguided is to make the sad mistake of confusing the messenger with the message.

I must confess that I do not find the authors' position—that the musician has always been found to be in a parlous state—to be terribly relevant to this discussion. The poor, we have been told on good authority, are always with us, and the same can be said for the sick—but surely we do not feel that

poverty and disease, or even death itself, should be passively accepted. The issue, after all, is not historical opinion but the situation we are in today, and we will be in tomorrow.

Rather than consider the present state of music and of music education itself, Mr. Polisi and Mr. Allen raise some weighty questions indeed: "Does art make life better? Does it make people better? If so, how? And if not, why not?" In rejecting the positions of some first-rate thinkers who argue that art is (or can be) a force for good, the authors clearly cannot answer their own questions in the affirmative. Their reasoning deserves quotation:

[I]f art by its nature made people better, the world would be a better place, and artists would be the best of people, which, to our continuing disappointment, they are not.

Though it was Mr. Polisi and Mr. Allen who first raised the issue of bleak perceptions and discouraging words, I must say that I can imagine few phenomena in liberal arts education more radically discouraging than the position, when voiced by those in positions of intellectual and moral authority, that the study of these magnificent treasures of civilization does not indeed make people better. Some may call this dismissal of the higher value of such study realistic; others cannot but find it cynical and even nihilistic.

Now, when I say this I do not by any means suggest that it can be *proven* to the satisfaction of this positivist age that art makes man good, or even that it can be *proven* that it can make him better. The problem, as always, is that fundamental bugaboo affecting logical, or quasi-scientific, formulations of causal relationships in matters involving man as individual and man in society: all human beings, and all groups, are unique, the present and future products of significantly different endowments and histories. Once this is granted, then the one basic requirement in proving causality in human affairs is missing. No experimentation based on the existence of an unaffected

but otherwise identical control group is possible, for it is not possible for us to examine how we—or anyone else—would have turned out had we been treated otherwise than we were by outside forces.

The implication of this dilemma for *proving* (and note that I emphasize the word *proving*) the ethical contribution of art—in this case music—to life is that we have no way of knowing for certain how "good" or even how much "better" art has made us, nor have we any certain way of knowing in what moral state we would be without art. For it seems undeniable that man has always had art, and it seems plain that art provides a large part of the way we know ourselves.

Let me take the worst case first. The great argument, it hardly need be said, against *any* positive connection whatsoever between art and the good is Nazi Germany. Here, under the demonic leadership of the unredeemable (on any human understanding) Hitler, a people who had created and preserved the greatest monuments of Western music engaged in unspeakable barbarities against strangers and their fellow countrymen alike. The stories of SS officers who loved Beethoven will give pause to any optimistic view of the beneficence of art. Yet even in these horrifying conditions of totalitarian slaughter, art and the love of art, no less than learning and its love, have preserved the humanity of those who have suffered so terribly. That German civilization survived even Hitler, and Russian civilization survived Stalin, is of inestimable value in making possible the long, slow climb back from the murderous abyss we have now twice witnessed in our century. It would be utopian to expect the frail reed of art to have stopped Hitler or Stalin; what is miraculous, and full of hope for our strivings, is that these monsters and their henchmen could not kill art.

Life, happily, is not always, or even mainly, about worst cases. On the level of our daily, more or less peaceful, lives, to say that the connection between art and the good cannot be proven is hardly to say that no such connection exists. Fortunately, what

we cannot prove, we can infer. The grounds for such inference are strong. From history we know that art, and the learning with which it has always been associated, have always been viewed (and acted upon) as lying at the core of civilization and its transmission. Man's history, after all, is to a large extent the history of his art and learning; whatever we are today, we are because of the incredibly complex interaction between our genetic endowments and that history.

But we can do more than infer that what I have chosen to bring together under the rubric of civilization, very much including music, makes for the good. We can believe. I suppose that the evidence for such belief belongs to the category of revelation. This revelation—that we are the better for our having lived for a short moment in art—is the common experience of music lovers. It is the never-to-be-forgotten experience of composers and performers at the most rewarding moments of their careers, and it is this experience which provides the only chance of sustaining their spirits in the inevitable years of infirmity and decline. This ecstatic experience is palpable in the hushed glow of an audience too rapt in exaltation at the end of a great work to applaud. It is the *raison d'être* of Sir George Grove's monumental first edition of the *Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1878-90), now, in subsequent editions, named for him. It is, I suppose, a kind of love: Wagner—no angel himself either as man or as political thinker—expressed this love memorably in the lines he wrote for the end of *Das Götterdämmerung* but then cut, because he knew he could better convey his highest thoughts through music than through words:

Not goods, not gold,
nor the splendor of gods;
not house, not hall,
nor the glamour of great lords;
not the deceiving bond
of gloomy treaties,
not the hard law
or moral hypocrisy;

blessed in joy and sorrow
let love alone be.¹

Uncomfortable with the connection between art and the good, Mr. Polisi and Mr. Allen would teach music students ethics. They clearly have something different in mind from, say, teaching the lessons and implications of the Ten Commandments; such teaching, after all, might seem too theological to find a place in secular education. They rather are concerned to teach "the nature and purposes of art from antiquity onwards . . . [and] such issues as the relations between ethics and human nature, freedom and responsibility, autonomy and ambition." This hoped-for taming of artistic "narcissism and arrogance" is to be achieved "without diminishing [the students'] artistic self-discipline"—I gather, through "a vigorous general education and a demanding regimen of practical experience." And so Mr. Polisi's and Mr. Allen's prescription for the betterment of the lives of music students, despite all their doubts, comes down to teaching the liberal arts, of which I must assume a leading component is art in general and music in particular.

Good: the issue then becomes how well—that is, how rigorously—the liberal arts are to be taught. Here Juilliard, or so it seems from the evidence provided by the school catalogue and the private reactions of students, relies on a formula perhaps best described as getting young people to ventilate their reactions to widely scattered and fragmentary readings of great, or at least well-known, works. Thus the 1987-88 catalogue describes the school's two required humanities courses; these courses, which together take up four semesters, begin with "influential pertinent essays drawn from philosophy, anthropology, and cultural criticism." After reading an unspecified amount of Homer and Sophocles, students go on to read something of works from Plato to Luigi Pirandello that "profoundly explore the

subjects of human nature and ethics . . . significantly address social and political life and ideals . . . [and] illuminate the nature and influence of art and the imagination." There are ten electives listed as well (in addition to foreign languages). There are no courses in English literature or composition, and there is only one course in American literature; unfortunately, the American literature class (along with courses in "Folklore and the Fairy Tale" and "The Nineteenth Century") was not given in the current academic year. What has been given this year does, however, include three visual-arts courses, a course on the Bible, and a course called "Fantasy and Prophecy in the Arts."² There are, I might add, no courses in the sciences offered at Juilliard.

The prevailing tone of what seems to be going on in the liberal arts at Juilliard is perhaps best conveyed by the catalogue description of the required humanities courses:

The emphasis throughout lies on the general interest and usefulness of these ideas, not on their academic significance. Students also write occasional essays on topics derived from the readings.

The crucial word in the passage above, I suppose, is "academic": Juilliard study is to be generally interesting and useful, not "academic." Given the condition of today's academy, it would be heartening if by "academic" those responsible for the Juilliard curriculum meant pedantic or even trendy activities. But somehow I doubt that the word "academic" is meant here as a criticism of college and university life at the present time. Instead, it seems to me highly likely

2 Interestingly, one of the two teachers listed as responsible for this last course, which is concerned with "monsters, apocalyptic visions and prophecies, surrealism, science fiction, and popular belief in scientific anomalies," is Peter Rojcewicz, whose catalogue biography describes among his academic credits his having been "[i]nvited to participate in the Essalen [*sic*] Institute conference on the scientific study of UFOs at Big Sur, California."

1 This translation from the original German is contained in Hans Mayer's *Portrait of Wagner* (1972).

that “academic” in this Juilliard context refers to intellectually rigorous and disciplined study; wherever such demanding study in the liberal arts may be a good thing, it is not to be so at Juilliard.

I must say that I find this complete retreat from any idea of intellectual standards in education disturbing; surely the very bright minds of the enormously gifted Juilliard students deserve more of an acquaintance with civilization than an approach which concentrates on the general interest and usefulness of this corpus rather than on its academic significance. It is not that the liberal arts, like the arts themselves, do not carry values of the greatest significance for the survival of civilization and life itself. Of course they do, and it is precisely for this reason that they must be taught in a rigorous and disciplined way in and for themselves. Only then can we find in them the ethical riches they encapsulate.

Mr. Polisi and Mr. Allen do come around at the end to the idea that “[a]rt can make life better, and it should make people better, artists no less than other people.” But it is significant that it is not, in their view, art itself—or any kind of academic learning—that conduces to this end but the use of art for the kinds of purposes which extra-artistic education—today education, tomorrow indoctrination—can be made to achieve.

Mr. Polisi and Mr. Allen may well feel that Juilliard is, after all, a music school (and a school, of course, of drama and dance as well), not a liberal arts college; rigorous instruction in the liberal arts, on this view of Juilliard’s purpose, is incompatible with the school’s educational mission. In this they may well be right, though such an admission would raise the question of the proper nature of music education and its place in the life of a well-educated individual at the end of the twentieth century. But if we accept that a school like Juilliard can do little on its own that is intellectually rigorous outside professional training, we are forced to face an extraordinary omission in Mr. Polisi’s and Mr. Allen’s article: their passing completely over the state of music today, and the relationship of music education to music, whether at Juilliard or elsewhere. There are problems in music composition and performance and their teaching today that are musical, not ethical; there are problems that arise not just out of the general moral condition of society but also out of the development and practice of music itself. Those responsible for the Juilliard School, a school which has the pick of young talents in America, have much to tell us in this regard. As a critic I have tried to discuss these matters; I look forward to what Mr. Polisi and Mr. Allen will say.

Editor’s note: Readers are reminded that *The New Criterion* does not publish during July or August. Our next issue will appear in September.

What's the usage?

by Joseph Epstein

In the preface to a small but impressively lucid book on punctuation written in 1939 and entitled *Mind the Stop*, the author, an Englishman named G. V. Carey, reserved his last sentences for “a spasm of self-consciousness” in which, given the year of publication, he felt he ought to register the fact that “the mind of one who happens to have an eye for a comma is not necessarily incapable of comprehending larger issues or embracing wider interests.” Yet perhaps no disclaimer, however mild, needed to be entered. One of the reasons that nations go to war is so that men like G. V. Carey, in immaculately setting out the subtleties of the semi-colon, can carry on the work of civilization. Today, nearly fifty years later, when the art of careful punctuation threatens among the young to become as widespread as that of intaglio, a book such as Carey’s seems rather more significant. But then those who have taken it upon themselves to be guardians of the language must alternate hourly in their feeling about their work between certainty of its fundamental importance and an at least equal certainty of its utter hopelessness.

All guardians of the language resemble a little the village idiot in the *shtetl* of Frampol who was given the job of standing at the village gates in wait for the coming of the Messiah. The pay is not high, he was told, but he didn’t have to worry about running out of work. The guardians of the language need similarly never worry about running out of work. Like Heraclitus’s famous river—

“Upon those who step into the same river different and ever different waters flow down”—the river of language continues to flow along, never remaining the same, changing every foot of the way. Heraclitus spoke of his river being in perpetual flux but never of its muddying, whereas in the river of language flux frequently does issue in mud, garbage, and other detritus. To change classical references, the task of the guardian of language can be likened to cleaning out the Augean stables with the horses still in them. This, for reasons needing no explanation, is not everybody’s idea of a good time.

What may need explanation is the motivation of those who go in for it. As a university teacher, I find myself, among my students, from time to time wielding a small Augean broom. Why do I bother? It won’t do to say, à la John Wayne in the role of federal marshal, “Cause it’s my job, ma’am.” It is closer to the truth to say that woolly circumlocutions, psychobabblous phrasing and sentiments, and language used as if it were a game of horseshoes (in which one expects points for being close) offends me. What it offends is my sense of decorum. When a student, asked about the quality of the character of Verloc’s relationship with his wife Winnie in Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*, answers, “At this point in time, a caring person would not consider it meaningful, at least hopefully not,” I find I cannot let it pass—especially at these prices. It offends me that such wobbly language is being

tossed around by a high-IQ kid in a hall of learning where the cover charge is roughly fifteen thousand dollars a head. Such language also makes it impossible, of course, to talk about literature or anything else above the level of yogurt.

I go directly into my gentle crank act. "Meaningful, Miss Goldstein?" I ask. "What can 'meaningful' possibly *mean*? And 'caring'—caring for or about what, exactly? Does time, I must inquire, truly have 'points'? I note, too, that you say 'hopefully.' Who precisely is doing the hoping in that sentence?" An amusing old guy, they must think, as I rocket off on one of these brief tirades, but with kinda a short fuse. I recall, too, an occasion on which one of my students asked me why I spoke so slowly. I hadn't been aware that I did. Then it occurred to me that, in my speech, at least before a classroom, I take pains to form complete sentences. For the majority of my students, most of whom come from homes where their parents attended university, and even though they themselves are enrolled in an elite (a word they do not take kindly to) school, hearing someone speak in complete sentences is a real novelty.

People who take pains with their language are not just now in danger, through their vast number, of bringing about a population explosion. They are instead a bit difficult to find; you won't, certainly, find them concentrated in any one place. You won't find many of them among the professoriat; in fact, much of the dreariest abstract language we now have was first put into circulation by social scientists, though nowadays historians, philosophers, and literary scholars are hot on the social scientists' gummy heels. But today no social class is notable for correct or interesting speech. It used to be said that the working class provided pungent and solidly concrete additions to the language and the upper-class provided standards of correctness. No longer.

Once upon a time, though not so recently as all that, careful English was part of the patrimony of the well-born. Edith Wharton, in her memoir *A Backward Glance*, noted

that a strong element in her upbringing was "a reverence for the English language as spoken according to the best usage," and this despite the fact that her parents read little and had scarcely any intellectual interests. "Usage, in my childhood, was as authoritative an element in speaking English as tradition was in social conduct," she writes. The kind of English Edith Wharton was taught to speak was "easy, idiomatic English, neither pedantic nor 'literary'"; and while her parents' sensitivity to careful English remained a mystery to her, they always wanted their children's English to be better, "that is, easier, more flexible and idiomatic." English like that ain't spoke here no more.

English is still spoke, of course, but it is rarely bespoke, as one imagines it was in Edith Wharton's New York, or at Henry Adams's Harvard. Language today seems chiefly to come off the rack, no matter what social class is speaking or writing it. Not that there aren't people who make very deliberate efforts to say precisely what they mean; or that there aren't writers—novelists and critics, essayists and poets, historians and philosophers, the occasional scientist—who command styles of true power, real elegance, and general felicity. There are, but their number and social provenance are not—probably cannot be—known. They have determined to take pains. But why do they bother? Why, now that the way one uses language has scarcely any effect on one's financial fate or social standing, does anyone any longer bother?

Although the honors list of those who have taken up the cause of good linguistic hygiene has over the centuries included Confucius, Cervantes, Swift, Samuel Johnson, William Hazlitt, and George Orwell, the same cause, it must be allowed, has attracted prigs, pedants, intellectual bullies, and snobs. "She is, I am sorry to have to say," a woman I know reported to me of another woman, "one of those people who is always misusing 'hopefully.'" More recently, I met a man who told me that, in the middle of delivering a wedding toast, he was corrected for incorrectly using the word "fulsome."

No doubt there were people in fifth-century B. C. Athens who discovered solecisms in Pericles's funeral oration as there were those in twentieth-century London who discovered solecisms in Winston Churchill's World War II broadcasts. Purists have always existed who write and speak with the linguistic equivalent of their little fingers crooked above the cup of language, people—they, I suspect, would prefer the word “persons”—of whom H. W. Fowler once remarked, “There speaks one of those friends from whom the English language may well pray to be saved, one of the modern precisians who have more zeal than discretion.” In the lengthy saga that one thinks of as the perpetual decline of the English language—it has been going on for nearly a thousand years—the current villains are well known: the perpetrators of the hopelessly abstract, the devotees of the too precise, the schoolmasters who invent unnecessary rules, the populists who decry the need for any rules whatsoever.

The heroes of this saga are those extraordinary writers who in every age demonstrate that more can be done with the language than might hitherto have been thought. Some among them, viewing the world in ways no one before them has done, forge new styles to give expression to their new views; others work within traditional styles, but through their individuality develop them to a higher power. Avant-garde or traditional, together such writers, whose unshakable assumption is that everything in the world can be rendered in words, freshen and regularly refreshen the language, saving it from ossification and from rot.

On occasion such writers have themselves complained of the spoliation of the language. Jonathan Swift, writing to his prime minister, held that “daily improvements [in English] are by no means in proportion to its daily corruptions; that pretenders to polish and refine it have chiefly multiplied abuses and absurdities; and that in many instances it offends against every part of grammar.” In his now famous essay “Politics and The English Language,” George Orwell,

in plain Orwellian fashion, set out the possibilities for deep corruption when politicians go to work on language. Evelyn Waugh, the most elegant and efficient of twentieth-century prose writers, used to fume against the horrendous lapses in English usage he claimed to find all around him—further evidence, of course, of the general degradation of the modern world that seemed so to please him. Edmund Wilson was not shy about returning certain of his correspondents' letters with his corrections of their grammar, syntax, and semantics indelicately scrawled in the margins.

Apart from demonstrating how language ought to be used through their own writing and sending up occasional wails about its debasement by politicians, social scientists, advertising men, and other linguistical thugs, writers have not generally been much interested in fighting the trench warfare of language. This has been left to such foot soldiers as lexicographers and linguists, many of them academics but perhaps the most impressive among them not. The English have been particularly strong in this line, a line that begins with James Murray (1837-1915), who personally edited roughly half the great *Oxford English Dictionary*; Henry Watson Fowler (1858-1933), who with his brother Frank edited the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* and alone wrote *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*; Eric Partridge (1894-1979), whose many lexicographical works include the *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, *Usage and Abusage*, and *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*; and Sir Ernest Gowers (1880-1966), who revised Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* and produced two remarkable brief books of his own entitled *Plain Words* and *The ABC of Plain Words*, which, taken together, have appeared in various editions as *The Complete Plain Words*.

All four men were born while Queen Victoria ruled, all had what one has come to think of as nineteenth-century energy, all had the quite sensible Victorian belief in self-improvement. K. M. Elisabeth Murray, in *Caught in the Web of Words*, has chronicled

her grandfather's, James Murray's, prodigious efforts in the composition of the *OED*. Of Eric Partridge, who was born a New Zealander and whose death occurred fewer than ten years ago, nowhere near so much is known, or at any rate has been revealed. Rather more is known of H.W. Fowler, who was in so many ways an extraordinary character, and I shall get to some of it presently. Sir Ernest Gowers is a man about whom very little is known, and this by design, for he was an English civil servant—a “public servant,” in the older and better phrase—and as such felt altogether content with anonymity. His, as we shall see, was a quieter but no less impressive contribution.

Although Henry Fowler was born twenty-two years before Ernest Gowers and Gowers died thirty-three years after Fowler, and although the two men never met, one tends to think of them as a tandem. Gowers, of course, performed a singular service in revising Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, tactfully bringing it up to date without allowing any serious loss in its idiosyncratic character. Gowers, in “H.W. Fowler: The Man and His Teaching,” has written the most intelligent essay on Fowler. But above and beyond these services that the younger man performed for the older, Gowers seems to complement Fowler as Fowler felt the word “meticulous” should have complemented the word “punctilious,” “the two covering between them the positive accuracy that omits no detail and the negative accuracy that admits no error.”

As befits a man who took it upon himself to shape up the English language, H.W. Fowler kept himself in top physical trim. Until nearly the end of his life, he was a runner and a swimmer; he ran to his swim, swam, and then home he ran. A photograph of Fowler that appears in *The Oxford University Press: An Informal History* shows him outside his cottage in Guernsey, bald, goateed, in shorts that fall just below the knees and in an English football jersey, holding a towel that he will doubtless use after his swim. He is a shortish man, well set-up phys-

ically—neither muscle-bound nor thin but without any trace of softness or fat, compact—with a confident smile that seems to come easily to him. Short, solid, humorous, H.W. Fowler may be said to resemble nothing quite so much as one of his own entries in *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*.

How does one happen to set oneself up as arbiter of the entire English language? In H.W. Fowler's case the answer is that he had first to fail at a number of much smaller tasks. The son of a schoolmaster, Fowler, after winning a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford, failed to get a first and had to settle for a second-class degree in Moderations and in *Litterae Humaniores*. Upon leaving Oxford, the master of Balliol, Benjamin Jowett (“There's no knowledge, but I know it”), gave him the following characteristically curt recommendation:

I have a very high opinion of Mr. H.W. Fowler. While at Balliol College he has made himself respected. He is quite a gentleman in manner and feeling and has good sense and good taste. He is a very fair scholar and has, I think, a natural aptitude for the profession of Schoolmaster.

A schoolmaster Fowler became, first teaching at a school in Scotland and then settling in at a quite good public school called Sedbergh in the northwest corner of Yorkshire, where he remained for seventeen years. Shy and fastidious as a young man, he had not the gift of easy intimacy, and consequently was a teacher of the kind that his students did not adore but came eventually—sometimes even in later life—to admire. Fowler left Sedbergh over a religious dispute with the headmaster, who asked that his housemasters put their students through confirmation, which Fowler, who was up for a housemastership, felt himself unprepared and unwilling to do. When the headmaster remained adamant on the point, Fowler wrote to him: “the choice is between acquiescence and resigning my post, and the latter is what I now feel compelled to

do It is better to recognize that we have a perfectly friendly, but irreconcilable difference of opinion, and to regard the matter as settled." Along with keeping himself in physical trim, Fowler, as this incident reveals, liked to keep himself in moral trim.

Fowler was forty-one years old when his teaching career was finished. He next turned to journalism. He moved to London and attempted to write for the British weeklies. He did publish in the *Spectator*, though not frequently enough to be thought a regular contributor. According to G. G. Coulton, upon whose lengthy memoiristic account of H. W. Fowler I have been drawing,¹ he put together two volumes in typescript of essays he had written, but no publisher was interested in them. He did bring out one of these volumes, which he entitled *More Popular Fallacies*, at his own expense. Of this volume, Coulton remarks: "It fell flat: being neither good enough nor bad enough for popular success." Doubtless the difficulty was in part owing to Fowler's style. Gowers, in his essay on Fowler, notes that "Fowler's style is mathematical rather than literary," adding: "His first concern was precision not elegance, and, as we all know, it is not easy to combine the two."

When Fowler was attempting to make his way as a journalist, the *Spectator* accepted one of his essays, but, having long delayed its publication, informed him that it would no longer be able to run it, though its editors enclosed a check for full payment. Fowler, with no spite but only his customary moral scrupulousness intended, returned the check. In 1915, with England at war, Fowler, at age fifty-seven, enlisted, claiming to be forty-four. (His brother Frank, at forty-five, also enlisted.) Given his own program of physical fitness, Fowler apparently found military training no hardship. What he did find a hardship was that, when his battalion was sent to France, he and his brother were not permitted to fight but

instead were given various dogswork—dish-washing, coal-heaving, portage—which caused him to write a formal letter owning up to his true age and requesting that he either be permitted to do real soldiering or be discharged. In the event, he and his brother were discharged, but the incident once again illustrates H. W. Fowler's scrupulosity, his moral fastidiousness.

Much earlier, in 1903 in fact, Fowler departed London to live in Guernsey. There he built a cottage fifty yards' distance from his brother Frank's cottage and roughly a mile from the sea, which made possible a daily swim and a two-mile run. It also made possible editorial collaboration with Frank, whose training in classics was quite as good as Henry's and whose intellectual interests were congruent with his older brother's. Their first combined enterprise was a translation, in four volumes, of the Greek writer Lucian (c. 117-180 A.D.) which appeared under the authoritative imprint of the Clarendon Press, of the Oxford University Press. Before the *Lucian* appeared, Henry Fowler inquired of his editor at the Oxford University Press about his interest in his and his brother's next project:

We have just begun to collect materials for a little book which we think might serve a useful purpose, but which would perhaps not be in your line. This is a sort of English composition manual, from the negative point of view, for journalists and amateur writers. There is a vast number of writers nowadays who have something to say and know how to make it lively or picturesque, but being uneducated cannot write a page without a blunder or cacophony or piece of verbiage or false pathos or clumsiness or avoidable dullness It might possibly, we think, be mildly entertaining as well as serviceable.

Charles Cannan, the editor of the Oxford University Press, replied that "we in the office would welcome an antibarbarus," and went on to explain that there were two possible publics for such a book: "one is the schools which desire something in the nature

1 "H. W. Fowler" by G. G. Coulton can be found in *Society for Pure English Tract Number XLIII*, pp. 99-158; the Clarendon Press, 1934.

of a Rhetoric (in the old sense). The other is that which you have in mind: the editor of the *Spectator* and the people who write in the *Times*." The book was eventually published, in 1906, under the title *The King's English* by H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler. Peter Sutcliffe, the author of the informal history of the Oxford University Press, writes, correctly, that the Fowlers' book "was never really suitable for schools, and it was taking a narrow view to suppose that it would serve as a guide for journalists." Nor did the book receive a hardy critical welcome. Desmond MacCarthy, whom one tends to think a generous critic, wrote of *The King's English* that "it is clear that such rules must often involve the consideration of barely perceptible subtleties which waste the writer's time." The greater significance of *The King's English*, however, is that it formed the base on which Henry Fowler, after his younger brother's death, would write *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*.

A Dictionary of Modern English Usage is one of a shelf of fifty or so great books written in English in this century. It is immensely helpful, happily memorable, and endlessly readable; it stands in a splendidly synecdochic relation to the culture that produced it: from the part that is this book one can infer the entire tradition of correctness, lucidity, and wit that once seemed emblematic of English intellectual life at its best. *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* is also clearly the book that all Fowler's previous experience led him to write. As for how the book came into being, after working on *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* and *The Pocket Oxford Dictionary*, both bearing the names of the two Fowler brothers (Frank died in 1918), Henry Fowler announced that he had grown tired of straightforward lexicography. He thought about turning to a dictionary that would leave out the obvious words and concentrate instead on idioms and other aspects of language that exist in a state of jumbled inexactitude in the minds of even the most highly intelligent people. Fowler thought of it as his "Idiom Dictionary," though at

Oxford University Press one of the principal editors referred to it, in a letter to Fowler, as "A Utopian dictionary [that] would sell very well—in Utopia." But Fowler, as Englishmen of his own day might have said, pressed on, finishing the work, which was given the title *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, in 1925. It was reprinted four times the year of publication, 1926, along with a special impression for the United States of fifty thousand copies.

Whenever a serious book becomes a best-seller, even a modest best-seller, an explanation is required. The most cogent explanation for the success of *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* is to be found in the character of its author. Pedagogue, lexicographer, essayist, late Victorian—all the elements in Fowler's character conjoined to make this remarkable book, a product of his intellectual maturity, the capstone to his career. Sir Ernest Gowers felt that the appeal of *Modern English Usage* "lies partly in the way the author reveals his idiosyncrasy to the reader," taking his definition of "idiosyncrasy" from Fowler's own entry on the word in *Modern English Usage*:

Its meaning is peculiar mixture, & the point of it is best shown in the words that describe Brutus: *His life was gentle & the elements So mixed in him that Nature might stand up and say to all the world, "This was a man."*

No supposed reference work has ever been more suffused by the spirit of a single man than H. W. Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, including Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*. In this wondrous work, Fowler, freed from the stringent demands of straight and strict lexicography, let fly, never restraining his wit or whimsy or opinionation. Every writer seeks his true form, and Fowler's was evidently the dictionary article, which one scarcely considers a literary form at all, though he was able to turn it into one. Even in Fowler's hands, an odd form it is; it is a form with a beginning, which usually formulates the problem; a middle, which provides illustrations of error occasioned by

ignorance of the problem; and generally no end whatsoever, for the article frequently trails off after the final illustration with no summarizing statement from the author. The wit and whimsy, the point and pique, are found at the front, as in this opening for the article "Sturdy Indefensibles," which sounds the characteristic Fowlerian note:

Many idioms are seen, if they are tested by grammar or logic, to express badly, even sometimes to express the reverse of, what they are nevertheless well understood to mean. Good people point out the sin, & bad people, who are more numerous, take little notice & go on committing it; then the good people, if they are foolish, get excited & talk of ignorance and solecisms, & are laughed at as purists; or, if they are wise, say no more about it & wait. The indefensibles, sturdy as they may be, prove one after another to be not immortal.

No one, I more than suspect, would ever think to look up such material in an entry with the title of "Sturdy Indefensibles," or look to "Elegant Variation" to deal with the problem of repetitions, or expect to find abbreviations under "Curtailed Words." Many items in *Modern English Usage*, to be sure, are precisely where one would expect to find them—"Split infinitive," "Participles," "Subjunctives"—as are entries on specific words that are not always used with sufficient distinctiveness: "barbarian," "barbaric," "barbarous," for example. But who would have thought to look up the vaguely archaic language of certain nineteenth-century novels under "Novelese," or would search out the wish to avoid perfectly useful common words under "Novelty Hunting"? The entry "Superiority" turns out to be about apologizing for using slang in one's prose, and has the following extraordinary beginning:

Surprise a person of the class that is supposed to keep servants cleaning his own boots, & either he will go on with the job while he talks to you, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, or else he will explain that the

bootboy or scullery-maid is ill & give you to understand that he is, despite appearances, superior to boot-cleaning. If he takes the second course, you conclude that he is not superior to it; if the first, that perhaps he is.

Owing to this often slightly bizarre arrangement, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* is a book best approached serendipitously (see the Fowler entry "Love of The Long Word"). It is a particularly fine volume to wander around in. When not going to the book for help with a particular problem—I looked a while back to see if Fowler had anything to say about the word "pique," which I used a few paragraphs before; apart from brief advice on pronunciation, he didn't—I tend to roam around in its pages, usually stopping at an entry on a word I have myself used but never with full confidence. Such a word I recently looked up in Fowler is "palpable," which he says provides a useful illustration "of the need of caution in handling dead metaphors." He then tells exactly what the word does mean, even in a generous definition, and closes with the admonition that "P. is one of the words that are liable to clumsy treatment of this sort because they have never become vernacular English, & yet are occasionally borrowed by those who have no scholarly knowledge of them."

I enjoy Fowler when he is dispensing not merely instruction but advice, particularly of a moralizing kind. I enjoy the Fowler who begins his entry "French Words" by remarking, "Display of superior knowledge is as great a vulgarity as display of superior wealth—greater, indeed, inasmuch as knowledge should tend more definitely than wealth towards discretion & good manners To use French words that your reader or hearer does not know or does not fully understand, to pronounce them as if you were one of the select few to whom French is second nature when he is not one of those few (& it is ten thousand to one that neither you nor he will be so), is inconsiderate & rude." *Modern English Usage* is a chest filled with such didactic gems. "Men, especially,"

wrote Fowler in his entry "Didacticism," "are as much possessed by the didactic impulse as women by the maternal instinct." The Victorian schoolmaster in Fowler was never for long in abeyance. If his *Modern English Usage* is in effect a book of instruction in manners—in how to conduct oneself on the page—it is also a book of moral instruction. For the Victorians, as their historian Gertrude Himmelfarb has convincingly argued, the separation between manners and morals did not exist; manners were morals, morals created manners, and with impressively salubrious result.

In a dispute over the grammatical construction that Fowler termed the "fused participle," Otto Jespersen, the Danish philologist, called H. W. Fowler an "instinctive grammatical moraliser." Sir Ernest Gowers, in his essay on Fowler, tells us that Fowler resented the attack but not the epithet. Gowers nicely deals with the charge of "instinctive grammatical moralising" when he writes: "The prime mover of Fowler's instinctive moralising was not grammatical Grundyism; it was intellectual fastidiousness. He had the soul of a craftsman and could not bear slovenly work." Fowler detested affectation and empty authority. He was ever the critic of the slipshod journalist, the pompous scholar, the precious aesthete. His hatred of humbug could on occasion take a moral turn, but he was inevitably moral on the side of good sense.

It may well be that the moral tone in Fowler, combined with the frequency with which he uses such words as "barbarous" and "vulgar," have lent *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* the reputation of a crotchety work composed by a heavy-breathing reactionary. Such a reputation, along with being unearned, couldn't be wronger. Nor will it do to score Fowler off as an amiable pedant with a penchant for moralizing and an agile wit. In a way that Fowler himself would no doubt have found amusing, he has come to stand, in matters having to do with English usage, for the stodgy, the staid, the stuffy. In point of plain fact, H. W. Fowler was in his day a radical. "Here," as Sir Ernest Gowers writes, "was an emancipator from

the fetters of the grammatical pedants that had bound us for so long."

It was Fowler who first held that it was better to split an infinitive than when not to do so was to lapse into a sentence that sounded barbarous. (His entry on "Split infinitive" begins: "The English-speaking world may be divided into (1) those who neither know nor care what a split infinitive is; (2) those who do not know, but care very much; (3) those who know & condemn; (4) those who know & approve; & (5) those who know and distinguish.") It was Fowler who held that the world knew greater crimes than ending a sentence on a preposition, that *different* need not always be followed by *from*, that it was permissible to use *whose* with an inanimate antecedent, that common words had an impressive dignity of their own. Everywhere Fowler worked to destroy the blind reverence for literary fetishes and to increase the respect for clear common sense. As Gowers rightly remarks: "Fowler's true place is among the first of the rebels rather than among the last of the die-hards."

Gowers ends his essay by asserting that "I do not see how in its essentials Fowler's teaching can ever be out of date." A brave assertion, but is it true? I think it is true while at the same time I think the audience for Fowler's teaching continues to diminish. Higher education was supposed to cause that audience to grow larger. "The spread of education," Fowler began his entry "Illogicalities" by writing, "adds to the writer's burdens by multiplying that pestilent fellow the critical reader." Pestilential some readers may be, yet, despite the vast spread of not only education but so-called higher education, epidemic their numbers have failed to become. Fowler could not have been unaware of this prospect, or of the fact that his was a valiant yet all but lost cause. "In this era of democracy," he wrote, "it can hardly be expected that the susceptibilities of so small a minority should be preferred to the comfort of the millions, and it is easier for the former to dissemble their dislike of barbarisms than for the latter to first find out what they are and then avoid them."

The need for such a book as Sir Ernest Gowers's *The Complete Plain Words*² is in itself evidence sufficient to prove H. W. Fowler's dour prophesy. It is a book originally written for civil servants by a civil servant. It was begun in the late 1940s at the invitation of the British Treasury, which was concerned about the quality of prose written by British officials. Now, the British civil service, at least in those days, was not like the American, where your Uncle Louie may have been able to get you a job because he had an in with a guy named Vito down at city hall. The British civil service, at any rate in its higher grades, was chiefly staffed by men who had gone to public schools, had had to pass extremely difficult examinations, and (certainly when the British empire was still a going concern) were often given immense responsibilities at an early age. It was for these men, as well as for military men, local government officials, and the staffs of public bodies (such as the railroad), that *The Complete Plain Words* was written. It was written because, it was felt, they badly needed it.

The man chosen to write it, Ernest Gowers, was himself a civil servant, and a high exemplar of the type. Gowers was especially exemplary in his propensity for self-effacement. "I know of no one in any walk of life who so dislikes and distrusts publicity as Sir Ernest Gowers," wrote Ivor Nicholson in *Pall Mall Magazine*. Although ostensibly a profile of Gowers, Mr. Nicholson's article does not tell much about him, apart from such facts as his having gone to Rugby, thence to Cambridge (earning a first in the classical tripos), thence into the civil service, where among other early jobs he served as principal private secretary to Lloyd George, who was then Chancellor of the Exchequer. The *Dictionary of National Biography* entry on Gowers—written by R. W. Burchfield,

the current editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*—notes: "Gowers may be regarded as one of the greatest civil servants of his day." Certainly the résumé of his jobs is immensely impressive; it includes the chairmanship of the Inland Revenue Department (England's IRS), London Regional Commissioner for Civil Defence (he was responsible for the defense of London during World War II), and the chairmanship of the Coal Mines Reorganization Commission (later known as the Coal Mines Commission). Gowers was, according to Lord Nugent, the chairman of more public enquiries and royal commissions than any other man of his day. "In fact," Lord Nugent writes, "his political convictions were unshakeably conservative, but his reputation for impartiality and integrity, combined with a penetrating intellect, were such that any Report from a Royal Commission or Public Enquiry which he produced was certain to win public confidence." R. W. Burchfield adds: "His courtesy, his fine sense of humour, and his unfailing clarity of expression explain why his services were so frequently sought."

Gowers was 6'3", blue-eyed, and a man of gentle but compelling charm. He had the enviable reputation of not suffering fools gladly yet of being a man of unstinting courtesy and unending patience. He had what sounds a happy home life. He was a good pianist and took great pleasure from music. His daughter, Mrs. Eileen Duveen, has recounted how, during the war, when Gowers was "Regional Commissioner for London, as an antidote to going round the bomb sites and dealing with the crises of a London at war, he would go to his local church where he had been given permission to play the organ, and for half an hour or so, relax with music." He was penetrating about politics, in which his was an insider's view, for he had known and worked with nearly all the great English political figures of the century. He kept up his reading in the classics and, Lord Nugent reports, "kept in touch with changing modern trends by reading the plays of modern playwrights—however awful he found some of them!"

2 This book, originally published in 1954, is a composite of *Plain Words* (1948) and *The ABC of Plain Words* (1951). David R. Godine is now bringing out this third edition, revised by Sidney Greenbaum and Janet Whitcut (320 pages, \$17.95), for which this essay will serve as an introduction.

Not least impressive of Gowers's achievements was his revision of Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, which he began at seventy-five and completed at eighty-five, a year before his death. Since Gowers's *Plain Words* is a book greatly respectful of Fowler, and one that strongly showed the influence upon it of *Modern English Usage*, it is scarcely surprising that the editors of the Oxford University Press chose Sir Ernest Gowers to revise it. Without divesting Fowler's book of its original author's strong character, Gowers streamlined the book, cutting out no longer relevant entries, trimming away references and illustrations that might make it seem antique, adding material that took account of such phenomena as the rise of sociology, which took place after Fowler's death, modernizing generally. Where Gowers added an entry, it invariably seems sensible for him to have done so. Some of the additions are brilliant, such as "Worsened Words," which takes up "changes in the meaning of words, and still more in their emotional content, [that] often reflect changes of opinion about the value of what they stand for," and which accounts for the slippage in prestige of such words as "colonial," "imperial," "academic," and "appeasement." Even though Gowers was a more understated man than Fowler, he could turn out a more than fair imitation of the master in his best whiplash mode, as in this passage from an article he added entitled "Abstractitus":

A writer uses abstract words because his thoughts are cloudy; the habit of using them clouds his thoughts still further; he may end by concealing his meaning not only from his readers but also from himself, and writing such sentences as *The actualization of the motivation of the forces must to a great extent be a matter of personal angularity.*

Usage does not change as rapidly as fashion in clothing, but over the long haul it does change as inexorably. To write a book on the subject is to court revision; or, more precisely, to hope that one has written some-

thing good enough to be found worthy of revision. But if your subject is usage, the need for revision is your fate. As Gowers revised Fowler, so now Gowers's *The Complete Plain Words* has itself been twice revised. Gowers's book is nowhere near so ambitious a book as Fowler's; it began life, after all, as a pamphlet. Where Fowler took as his subject all that was in disarray in English usage, Gowers's more modest aim was to aid officials to write with greater clarity. Fowler's book is essential for all who take writing as their craft—writers, editors, teachers—as well as for those who, as Thomas Mann puts it in *Doctor Faustus*, find it "interesting to see how man can use words and what he gets out of them." Gowers's book addresses itself more directly to the questions of how to avoid awkward writing and how to evade lapsing into grammatical errors.

Gowers is less crackling and uncompromising, more measured and reasonable, than Fowler. He supplies therefore less fun but more perspective. He tells a reader what he needs to know, and tells it with an impressive sense of limitation. In the original *Complete Plain Words*, for example, Gowers allows that much has been written on the art of paragraphing, then adds: "But little of it helps the ordinary writer; the subject does not admit of precise guidance." He then goes on to tell his reader what little can be usefully said on the subject: that paragraphs oughtn't to be too long, that they should be unitary in subject matter and sequential in treatment, and so forth. In his Epilogue, he writes that his book runs the risk of making things look worse than they are, adding: "The true justification for such a book is not so much that official English is specially bad as that it is specially important for it to be good."

Gowers's good sense, reasonableness, and superior perspective can be a helpful brake on the runaway fanaticism that seems to set in among those of us who have decided to take a small part in that best of all lost causes, the battle for good usage. Gowers

does not lead one to want to give up the battle, but only to be more judicious in picking one's targets and more careful not to squander one's ammo. The first point he reminds one of is that the English language is not cast in marble, *per omnia saecula saeculorum*. He writes:

English is not static—neither in vocabulary nor in grammar, nor yet in that elusive quality called style. The fashion in prose alternates between the ornate and the plain, the periodic and the colloquial. Grammar and punctuation defy all the efforts of grammarians to force them into the mould of a permanent code of rules. Old words drop out or change their meanings; new words are admitted. What was stigmatised by the purists of one generation as a corruption of the language may a few generations later be accepted as an enrichment, and what was then common currency may have become a pompous archaism or acquired a new significance.

It is salutary to remember that two such smart fellows as Joseph Addison and Jonathan Swift objected to the emergence of the useful word "mob" (which derives from "mobile"). No doubt others have looked down upon "gazebo," "gismo," and "go-go." A new word is a fine thing when it is vivid and crisp and amusing and needed. New formations of old words, the most common mechanism of which derives from turning old nouns into new verbs ("finalize," "prioritize"), has to be viewed with the gravest suspicion, but at the same time it is useful to recall, as *The Complete Plain Words* reminds us, that this is the way the words "diagnose" and "sterilize" entered the language. Mike Tyson, the current heavyweight champion, speaking of his wife's initial distrust of boxers, not long ago remarked that this changed when she met him: "I took her off her feet," he said. "I suaved her." As a verb, "suave" is mildly amusing, but even now I see the word's ruination in an advertising campaign: "Suave her with Soave Bolla."

The problem is that it is difficult to object to most new words, or terms, or even trends,

on principle. Usually there is no principle involved. One despises a new word because it sounds barbarous; yet once that word barbarous is past one's lips, the game is up—the charge of snobbery has already been entered. I do not mind the charge all that much myself, but I prefer to argue from solider ground. Too often the ground in these matters slides away from under one. The argument from etymology, for example, is not usually convincing. I am someone who uses the word "presently" in the sense of "soon" or "by and by" and not, as it is nowadays more often used, as a synonym for "currently." I have all along been doing so under the assumption that I had the authority of etymology on my side. Wrong. The Gowers-revised Fowler entry on "presently" has it that the word originally meant "instantly," and so its etymology is really closer to "currently" than to my usage. I shall continue to use the word in the way I have, but henceforth with a slight suspicion that I may merely be suaving myself.

When I say that it is difficult to object to new words, terms, or trends on principle, what I mean, more precisely, is that it is difficult to object to them on general principles. One has, as in traffic and divorce courts, to take each case as it comes, arguing the demerits of every separate entry. I do not like the word "arguably," for example, as it is used in the sentence, "Anthony Powell is arguably one of the great English novelists of the twentieth century." I think that, in this usage—in which the word "arguably" means "a respectable argument for the case could be made"—it is a weasel-word, which allows one to get around answering the question of whether Powell is or isn't one of the century's great English novelists. I am not much for the word "intriguing" either, as in the sentence, "I find women of her kind intriguing." I cannot see what advantage "intriguing" in this usage has over "interesting" or "fascinating," except perhaps to make the person who uses it himself sound, you should pardon the expression, "intriguing." Fowler says of the word used in this sense that "it is one of the Gallicisms, &

Literary Critics' Words, that have no merit whatever except that of unfamiliarity to the English reader, & at the same time the great demerit of being identical with & therefore confusing the sense of a good English word." I would only add that, so often has the word come to be used in the way I have described it, it no longer has the merit of unfamiliarity.

In his day, Sir Ernest did not have to deal with the vexing problem of ethnic sensitivities, where even the nomenclature of groups is regularly changing, so that one cannot know if, say, a word such as "Chicano" is or is not in good form on a given day. He also escaped the earth before the most recent wave of feminists arrived with the demand that language be—get ready for a word that is going to look like a loose piece of barbed wire—"desexitized." Not only do the more exacting feminists wish to eliminate feminine nouns such as *actress* and *poetess*, but they are none too pleased with masculine ones such as *chairman* and *mankind*. The current editors of *The Complete Plain Words* suggest writing one's way around the problem. "You will avoid giving offence," they write, "by using *human accomplishments* instead of *man's accomplishments* and *working hours* instead of *man hours*."

That is probably sound enough advice, though I do not myself think that the day of equality will be at hand when everybody uses "Ms.," and heads of academic departments all refer to themselves as "chair," and people who do not know the sex of their unseen audience address them in letters as "Dear Gentlepersons." I myself do not like "Ms." because you cannot say it without hissing; I do not like "chair" because it is patently ridiculous; and as for "gentlepersons," the aroma of a bloodless vegetarianism clings to it, like horse manure to a football cleat, inescapably. No, in my view the problem of sex and language cuts much deeper than such superficialities. It is much better engaged at the level where one can no longer think of a man as "enraged," while a woman at the same pitch of anger is declared "hysterical." It is better engaged at the level where one no

longer thinks of certain work, or subjects, or points of view as belonging exclusively to one or the other sex. Meanwhile, though my experience here may be unusual, I have yet to meet a man who has been eager to fall into line with the rules of the feminist thought-control police who I thought truly respected the intelligence of women.

Which brings me to another category of words I think fit for outlawing. These are words that once seemed quite all right, but have now to be turned in for over-use and ill-use. "Experience" used as a verb is such a word: "Kent," the cigarette ad runs. "Experience it!" (Death, the surgeon general adds, risk it!) "No problem" is a phrase that has had it, especially with the ejaculatory "hey" before it; "no problem" is also coming, in the United States, to replace "you're welcome." "Special" as an adjective is now at the Hallmark greeting-card level of language, particularly when it is followed by "person." A "special person" usually turns out to be a "caring person," as one need scarcely add. Well, one could go on, and I doubtless shall, the flecks of foam forming at the corners of my mouth, but not here and not now.

Many have been the events and moments in recent history when one has wished that certain figures from the past had been alive to comment upon them. How fine to have had H. L. Mencken's report on the creationism-evolutionism controversy, or A. J. Liebling on the gloating of the press around the time of Watergate, or Max Beerbohm on the Pop Art movement, or Edmund Wilson on any of the past ten years' meetings of the Modern Language Association. As for H. W. Fowler and Sir Ernest Gowers, they, were they alive today, would find plenty to keep them busy. Fowler, after sampling some of the work of contemporary academics—feminists, structuralists, Marxists—would doubtless wish to begin his *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* over from scratch. Gowers would readily see the need for another *Plain Words*, this one written for literary critics. Funny business, language—like the man said, the pay may not be high, but you're never out of work.

The death and resurrection of postmodern architecture

by Roger Kimball

It is obvious to anyone interested in contemporary architecture that the last ten or fifteen years have been a time of tremendous ferment, energy, and above all confusion for this most public of the arts. While a handful of star architects continue to bask in glamour and celebrity, there is widespread suspicion that the profession as a whole is in disarray. The carousel of architectural “styles” that one has seen whiz past with dizzying rapidity, the succession of pretentious, aggressively mediocre buildings that litter our cities’ skylines, the plethora of arcane theories advanced to “explain” every conceivable species of architectural practice—all this has left the world of architecture a bit stunned and uncertain where to turn for direction. The confident rise of postmodernism in the Seventies and early Eighties has been succeeded by a period of doubt and reassessment. Not that there is much indication that the paraphernalia of postmodernism is losing popularity. On the contrary, postmodernist grandiosity remains the order of the day among most corporate clients and ambitious homebuilders hoping to make an architectural “statement.” But neither architects, nor their clients, nor the public at large seem quite so sure these days that the answer to the much publicized failings of modernist architecture is to be found in skyscrapers bedizened with Chippendale tops and pastel façades, or in houses decked out with pseudo-Palladian windows and slapdash historicist ornamentation.

The resulting atmosphere is one of frenetic indecision. Amidst talk of the death of postmodernism and speculation about the next wave of architectural fashion, vanguard spokesmen for the profession seem deeply divided: apologetic and querulous by turns, longing to proselytize yet lacking a compelling vision of the future. In this situation, perhaps the most helpful service a critic can render is to provide a kind of “report from the front” on some of the major controversies and ideas that are unfolding in architectural circles today. Two recent events—a symposium on architectural education that was held at Princeton University and a debate sponsored by the Parsons School of Design in New York City—offered a good sampling of the principal campaigns now being waged in elite architectural circles. Indeed, taken together with a handful of books recently published by some of the participants at those events, they may be said to epitomize the conflicted spirit of contemporary architecture and are thus worth discussing at some length.

Let us begin with “Architecture and Education: The Past Twenty-Five Years and Assumptions for the Future,” a day-long symposium sponsored by the Princeton School of Architecture earlier this year. Convened to honor Princeton’s premier postmodernist architect, Michael Graves, on the occasion of his twenty-fifth year teaching at the university, the symposium drew an enthusiastic

audience of several hundred students, faculty, and interested outsiders, who crowded into McCosh Hall to witness the proceedings. One has not heard quite so much about Mr. Graves lately; but the man who brought us the Portland Public Service Building, the Humana building, the proposal to expand the Whitney Museum of American Art, and sundry other delights (an exhibition of drawings and models by Mr. Graves was on view next door to remind us of his contributions to architecture) continues to occupy a central place in the architectural limelight. And as limelight is attracted by limelight, it was not surprising that the symposium's participants included such luminaries as Peter Eisenman, Robert Venturi, Robert A.M. Stern, and Frank Gehry.

The festivities began with some brief remarks by Robert Maxwell, dean of the School of Architecture. Looking back over the changes that had taken place in architectural education during the last twenty-five years, he spoke enthusiastically about the stewardship of his predecessor, Robert Geddes, made some obligatory criticisms of modernist architecture, and praised what he called the "semiotic revolution" in architecture—that university-born revolution that encourages us to treat architecture as a kind of "text" to be deciphered and that went hand in hand with the flowering of postmodernism. As Dean Maxwell rightly noted, the application of semiotics to architecture began in the Sixties and was given a tremendous boost by Robert Venturi's notorious 1972 manifesto glorifying the semantic richness of the urban strip, *Learning from Las Vegas*. Venturi "crossed semiotics with communications and produced postmodernism," Dean Maxwell told us with undisguised pride.

Despite this revolution, however, the good dean also assured us that education at Princeton's School of Architecture had not changed nearly so much as had the practice of architecture over the last quarter century. At Princeton, there was still an "unchanging emphasis on history and theory and a con-

tinuing search for a dialogue that will give meaning to practice." An "unchanging" emphasis, it should be noted, that nevertheless has brought with it all manner of "semiotic" innovations, including the newest wrinkle in architectural theory, "deconstructivism." This barbarous neologism—which derives from the more familiar term "deconstruction"—denotes a theory and practice of architecture motivated largely by various ideas and catch-phrases appropriated from chic literary theory. One thus sees architects obsessed with language, rejecting traditional aesthetic values like clarity, order, and harmony, and designing buildings that seek to undermine or "deconstruct" such conventional "prejudices" as the desire for comfort, stability, and commodiousness. So it turns out that the great thing about Princeton's pluralistic ethos is that it can embrace a theory that is utterly at odds with everything traditional architectural pedagogy taught and yet somehow, miraculously, it can remain "unchanged."

Though Dean Maxwell's remarks were generously laced with the good-humored, self-congratulatory platitudes that academic administrators are expected to emit on such occasions, he did obliquely touch upon two points that have come to be central to most contemporary academic thinking about architecture and that were much in evidence at Princeton that day: 1) the contention that modernist architecture was a social and artistic failure that postmodernism has begun to remedy, and 2) the view that architecture is essentially a "narrative" art. One could not be certain that Dean Maxwell appreciated the troubling implications of these ideas, especially the second; one sensed, indeed, that his avuncular, jokey style and what we might call his academic ecumenicism effectively insulate him from having to contemplate the intellectual or artistic consequences of the ideas he routinely bestows his blessing on as dean. But it soon became clear that several of his distinguished colleagues grasped the radical drift of these two ideas with all possible clarity.

Anthony Vidler, for example, who teaches

the history of architecture at Princeton and who made a name for himself in avant-garde circles for his contributions to the prestigious architecture magazine *Oppositions* in the Seventies, provided us with an astringently academic lecture on the history of architecture and architectural theory in the university. Professor Vidler's lecture aimed to show that, once they had been ensconced in the university, the main task of the history and theory of architecture was to uncover the "hidden premises" of the profession and to spark students "to interrogate the limits of their own practice." Supported by a *mélange* of quotations from or allusions to writers as various as the architectural historian Colin Rowe, the literary critic Harold Bloom, and the philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce and Michel Foucault, Professor Vidler championed the contemporary role of architectural history in the university because it made students "uncomfortable" and helped them to "think past" the traditional models of architecture (to what?), because it encouraged them to investigate "the politics of discourse" that was entrenched in the profession, and because it led them to question the unfortunate "hegemony" of the reigning educational system. Here again we can see the extent to which fashionable ideas from departments of English and comparative literature have seeped into architectural theory: Professor Vidler's talk was hardly more than a tapestry of clichés bemoaning the ideological nature of traditional educational hierarchies and asserting the essentially subversive nature of history and theory.

But while he adhered strictly to the orthodox academic position that orthodoxy must be questioned and exposed, Professor Vidler's lecture was no match, either in entertainment value or in defiant insouciance, for the contributions of Peter Eisenman, who spoke next and who made it his business to speak often from the floor as the day went on. Now Mr. Eisenman is a curious case. Excepting Philip Johnson and maybe one or two others, he is as well known and greatly honored as any American

architect living. He has taught at Princeton, at Harvard, at Yale, at Cooper Union, and many other institutions; his fame is international: scarcely a panel of American architects is drawn up for a foreign legation in which his name does not figure. And he is one of only seven architects whose work has been chosen to appear in Philip Johnson's much anticipated exhibition of "Deconstructivist Architecture," which is scheduled to open at the Museum of Modern Art this month (about which more below).

But on what does Mr. Eisenman's reputation rest? A founder and for several years the director of the fabled Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York, he was also an editor and guiding force of *Oppositions* for many years, and was consequently in a position to influence the course of intellectual debate about architectural matters. What has he built? A few houses in the Sixties and Seventies, a fire station, a housing project in Berlin, and, at the moment, a biology center for the University of Frankfurt. Not a great deal more. But Mr. Eisenman has something else that has catapulted him into the forefront of architectural discourse: his language is adamantly, famously, extravagantly obscure. Indeed, judging from the respectful laughter of his audience at Princeton, people, expecting him to be unintelligible, want him to be *outrageously* unintelligible—the idea being, I gather, that if he is going to be obscure he may as well be amusingly so.

And Mr. Eisenman can be quite amusing. There is something of the intellectual *agent provocateur* about him: he delights in stirring up controversy and strife. Accordingly, he began his *ex tempore* remarks with a couple of anecdotes whose main intent would seem to have been to insult his colleagues. The first was mildly obscene and not worth repeating; but the second had a peculiar pertinence and deserves to be recounted. When visiting the zoo in London, Mr. Eisenman told us, he especially liked to see the tea party put on Friday afternoons by the monkeys. Dressed up in the appropriate clothes, some would be coaxed to play maid and go through the motions of serving, while others

would sit around as master and mistress. There they were, playacting, chattering away to themselves, Mr. Eisenman observed, "but they never knew what they were saying." This might, he suggested, have some relevance to what was going on that day at Princeton.

He was right. The uncanny aptness of Mr. Eisenman's anecdote was brought home to me again and again as the day wore on, not least, I regret to say, during the course of his own presentation. Beginning with the charge that "we are all nostalgics" and that the symposium itself was an event of "enormous nostalgia," he castigated postmodernism's reactionary penchant for adopting historicist ornamentation. He then went on to predict that the generation of students from "1975 to 1985" would usher in a new era of architectural practice, a "theoretical practice energized by an idea of history." The rise of such a practice could afford us the first opportunity to articulate a "theory"—as distinct from a mere history—of modernism, Mr. Eisenman told us. This new theory of modernism would not traffic in any nostalgia for the avant-garde but, on the contrary, would be (in his inimitable words)

a theory of the center, that is, a theory which occupies the center. I believe only when such a theory of the center is articulated will architecture be able to transform itself as it always has and as it always will But the center that I am talking about is not a center that can be the center that we know is in the past, as a nostalgia for center. Rather, this not new but other center will be . . . an interstitial one—but one with no structure, but one also that embraces as periphery its own centric position A center no longer sustained by nostalgia and no longer sustained by univocal discourse.

Of course, Mr. Eisenman was, as I noted, speaking extemporaneously; and it's possible that my tape recorder did not catch every last word; but there is no denying that this is an expostulation of formidable elusiveness. Nor is Mr. Eisenman's more considered prose always more intelligible. We have only

to turn to his latest book, entitled *Houses of Cards*, to see his verbal shenanigans in top form.¹ In *Houses of Cards*, Mr. Eisenman presents the six houses he designed (of which only four have been built) in the Sixties and Seventies more or less as demonstration pieces to illustrate his theories about narrative architecture and about unsettling the traditional meaning of "home." (Appropriately, the houses are not named after their owner or location but are bluntly called House I, House II, and so on.) The book gives an unusually good sense of Mr. Eisenman's style of thought, and it is worth taking a bit of a detour from the Princeton symposium to consider some of its more memorable highlights.

Noting that the book was assembled from fragments, Mr. Eisenman correctly observes that "it promises and prohibits access; it directs and meanders." Helping out with the meandering are those other masters of impenetrability, the Marxist architectural critic Manfredo Tafuri and the co-editor of *October*, Rosalind Krauss. Mr. Eisenman reprints a 1977 essay by Miss Krauss and a 1980 essay by Mr. Tafuri, along with a new essay of his own. In the texts collected here, he writes, "as in the houses, the ideas transform and decompose. In fact, I ask that the reader augment a traditional reading of this book by also treating the texts and the book as a whole as objects, and by reading the houses, individually and in ensemble, as texts." Presumably to help the reader augment a "traditional reading" of the book, Mr. Eisenman has included numerous sketches, drawings, and photographs of the houses, as well as photographically reproduced copies of some of his rough notes—ostentatiously crumpled, torn, and patched together, full of emendations and crossings-out. I suppose we are meant to regard these salvaged scraps (if indeed they *are* salvaged scraps and not carefully manufactured mementos) as the leavings of genius. They do, I

1 *Houses of Cards*, by Peter Eisenman, with essays by Rosalind Krauss, Peter Eisenman, and Manfredo Tafuri; Oxford University Press, 224 pages, \$60.

admit, contribute to one's regarding the book as an "object" rather than a text, but I am not at all sure that they deepen one's appreciation of the architecture they are meant to comment on. From the bits on "House IV," for example, we learn that

this work is an attempt to transcend our traditional view of

designing
seeing
understanding

our environment

it is an attempt to alienate the individual from the known way in which he perceives and understands his environment.

But the notes are nothing compared to Mr. Eisenman's essay. Grandly informing us that "the essence of the act of architecture is the dislocation of an ever-reconstituting metaphysic of architecture," Mr. Eisenman tells us that his six houses are all "governed by the intent to define the act of architecture as the dislocation and consequent reconstitution of an ever-accruing metaphysic of architecture." What, you ask, is "an ever-accruing metaphysic of architecture"? Mr. Eisenman never says, but it is clear that he has a special liking for the word "metaphysic." In addition to the "metaphysic of architecture" that he is fond of invoking, we also encounter the "metaphysic of the center," the "metaphysic of the house," even "the metaphysic of dining."

Concerning the last, for example, we learn that Houses III and IV explore "an alternative process of making occupiable form . . . a process specifically developed to operate as freely as possible from functional considerations. From a traditional point of view, several columns 'intrude on' and 'disrupt' the living and dining areas as a result of this process Nonetheless, these dislocations . . . have, according to the occupants of the house, changed the dining experience in a real and, more importantly, unpredictable fashion." Please note that Mr.

Eisenman does not assert that the occupants claim that his ill-placed columns have done anything to make "the dining experience" more *pleasant*. Nor would he want them to. For one of the main goals of Mr. Eisenman's architecture (and his writing, too, one suspects) is to subvert anything so bourgeois as comfort or intelligibility. As he puts it, his houses "attempt to have little to do with the traditional and existing metaphysic of the house, the physical and psychological gratification associated with the traditional form of the house . . . in order to initiate a search for those possibilities of dwelling that may have been repressed by that metaphysic."

In fact, if Mr. Eisenman can be said to have a thesis, it is the standard academic chestnut that the threat of modern technology, and especially of nuclear weapons, has rendered the traditional notion of home—more, the traditional notion of man—otiose. "With the scientifically orchestrated horror of Hiroshima and the consciousness of the human brutality of the Holocaust," Mr. Eisenman gravely intones, "it became impossible for man to sustain a relationship with any of the dominant cosmologies of the past; he could no longer derive his identity from a belief in a heroic purpose and future Man now lives in an *in extremis* condition." The most wonderful thing about this apocalyptic vision (which is much in evidence in architectural theory these days) is that it gives license to the most extraordinary claims. For if man now really lives *in extremis*, then of course everything can be questioned, everything overturned, with impunity, not least the traditional "anthropocentric" function of architecture. Here is Mr. Eisenman on architecture as shelter:

But as shelter also exists in the mind as an idea, in its metaphysical state architecture is a conceptual reflection on physical presence, an "absence" in a material sense. From this perspective, what was earlier described as a traditional architectural history founded on dominant vectors of truth can also be seen as an ideological effort to screen architecture's

intrinsic absence behind an emphasis on its physic [*sic*]. It could be said that this screening is a sign of the endurance of anthropocentrism's privileging of presence and centeredness, even beyond its own crisis.

If the issue is architecture considered as a "physic," I suppose one could admit that there is something emetic about this passage. But what, finally, is Mr. Eisenman getting at here? Forget about the deconstructivist curlicues and non sequiturs—the prattle about the "metaphysical state of architecture," the illogical suggestion that "a conceptual reflection on physical presence" is somehow the same as "an 'absence' in a material sense": all that is simply part of the verbal static that automatically crackles through his speech and writing. And don't be put off by the formidable talk of "dominant vectors of truth" or "privileging of presence and centeredness." I know it's nonsense, but I'm quite sure that Mr. Eisenman can't help it: his writing has always been like this, laden with half-digested ideas and jargon culled from whatever abstruse academic theories happen to be making the rounds. Perhaps it has something to do with those monkeys he studied in London. But do consider the final sentence, the one suggesting that traditional architectural history is faulty because it blindly indulges in various "anthropocentric" habits. At bottom, it is nothing more than a simple-minded inversion of every tried and true tenet about the function of architecture, an inversion that is finally as insupportable as it is shocking initially. Immersed in Mr. Eisenman's chatter, one easily forgets that architecture is essentially about building habitable buildings, buildings that we live and work in, play and worship in, not buildings that we struggle to decode.

There is a great deal more that one could say about Mr. Eisenman's essay. Perhaps most amusing is his admission, near the end of the piece, that his houses were not as radical as he had hoped because they turned out to be "grounded in the very anthropocentric metaphysic that they were intended to contravene." Too bad! Though in truth I have confidence that Mr. Eisenman's current love

affair with the nihilistic presuppositions of deconstruction will prove to be a great aid in expunging anything resembling an "anthropocentric metaphysic" from his architecture and his theorizing.

If few of the speakers at Princeton were as radical as Mr. Eisenman, none were as daz-
zlingly obscurantist. In fact, after Mr. Eisenman's brief presentation, the proceedings were often downright dull until nearly the end of the day. There was a forgettable response to Professor Vidler's and Mr. Eisenman's talks. Then the architectural historian Demetri Porphyrios, who is known especially for his work on the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, purveyed another terribly academic lecture on the evolution of architectural theory over the last twenty-five years. His essential message seems to have been that modernism has been revealed as bankrupt. In Professor Porphyrios's own terms, modern eclecticism and post-structuralism have assumed dominance and have mounted a "totally devastating critique of the ontological assumptions and also the aesthetics of modernism." Just how this was accomplished was not specified—perhaps because it is easier simply to assume a "totally devastating critique of ontological assumptions" than it is to recount it convincingly. In any case, Professor Porphyrios went on to provide us with a kind of catalogue of different versions of post-modernism, correctly noting that Robert Venturi's celebrated notion of architecture as a "decorated shed"—that is to say, as a neutral box to which ornament is arbitrarily applied—is presupposed by all versions of postmodernism. His reflections were generally insightful, but it was difficult to know quite where he stood on many issues: in the end, one was left with a multitude of intelligent distinctions but no coherent point of view—a situation that is not exactly rare at such academic gatherings.

The following presentations can be passed over quickly. Robert Venturi, who spoke next, was perhaps the most disappointing speaker of the day. One naturally expected something quite engaging from the author of

Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture (1966), that self-described “gentle manifesto” that has often been credited with inaugurating the turn to postmodernist architecture. But in the event, he did little more than offer a few reminiscences on the deplorable state of architectural education in the 1940s, when the modernism of Gropius was regnant, and laud Princeton for its consistently “non-doctrinaire” approach to education.

Mr. Venturi's presentation was succeeded by a round-table discussion moderated by the art historian Irving Lavin. Rather like Dean Maxwell, Professor Lavin is one of those liberal academics who treat every new intellectual fashion as an expression of the beneficent spirit of pluralism. Accordingly, and again rather like Dean Maxwell, Professor Lavin appeared to be in favor of everything and against nothing—except, of course, any position that presumed to question the cogency or desirability of those new intellectual fashions, for such questioning betrayed a lamentable lack of the pluralistic spirit. Thus he admitted that the architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable fell from grace in his eyes when she dared to criticize postmodernism. In Professor Lavin's view, postmodernism is an attempt to reconstruct “the ancient legacy of culture”—a bizarre thought, really, since postmodernism is no more concerned with the “ancient legacy of culture” than is *Vogue* magazine. But it was no more bizarre than his later suggestion that one of the nifty things about deconstruction was that it might provide a “common ground” between modernism and postmodernism or that it had something to do with “man's eternal search for a noble ideal of harmony, balance, and perfection, or with his equally eternal struggle with irrationality, instability, and chaos.” In other words, for Professor Lavin, deconstruction was hardly to be distinguished from classical humanism.

After lunch, the architects Robert A. M. Stern and Frank Gehry made brief presentations. Mr. Stern ran through an honor roll of architects who influenced him (what could be more exciting?), concluding with

some heady praise for Michael Graves. Frank Gehry—who is just now one of the “hottest” architects practicing² and another one of the seven chosen for Philip Johnson's “Deconstructivist Architecture” exhibition—did little more than supply us with a narrated slide show of some of his work. The afternoon wound down with some remarks by the English architect Alan Colquhoun on Lévi-Strauss, semiology, and postmodernism, a final round table moderated by Dean Maxwell, and a few words of thanks from Michael Graves.

Dean Maxwell began the round-table discussion by professing his pluralistic credentials: “I disagree with everybody who has a final answer,” he assured us, “and I agree with everybody . . . who believes that constant change is the order of the day.” But Mr. Eisenman was having none of this wishy-washy, Heraclitean liberalism. He rose from his place in the audience to expound a bit about deconstruction, the end of Western metaphysics, and to announce that “we are all a bunch of old fogeys holding on to a teetering system.” “The only truth today is that we are found with the loss of truth,” he told us darkly, as if such second-hand Nietzschean sentiments were a startling revelation—or, indeed, as if they were apodictically true.

Despite Mr. Eisenman's plea that we study things “not as truth but as some sort of knowledge that can be opened up and studied” (?!), despite Mr. Colquhoun's insistence that “education is always a matter of inculcating a certain ideology,” and so on, it was often easy to forget that this symposium was supposed to deal with the subject of architectural education. It was with considerable interest, then, that I listened to a woman from the audience ask the distinguished members of the panel to compare the requirements for architectural education today with the requirements for a degree in engineering, music, and mathematics. It

2 See Diana Ketcham's essay “Frank Gehry in Vogue,” in the March 1988 issue of *The New Criterion*, pp. 50-57.

was, I thought, an unusually intelligent question. A full answer would have had to say something about those aspects of architecture that are akin to art and craft as well as about those that are straightforwardly matters of calculation and engineering. A full answer, indeed, would have said a good deal about the hybrid nature of architecture, its functional *and* its aesthetic claims, its sometimes uneasy place between engineering and art. But the question was not deemed serious by Messrs. Maxwell and company. After a brief embarrassed silence, there were a few halfhearted attempts to dismiss the question with ridicule or patronizing obfuscation. Perhaps this means that Dean Maxwell disagrees not only with “everybody who has a final answer,” but even with those who ask questions that might admit of such answers. It’s a wonderful philosophy for an academic dean.

Many of the themes that were bandied about at Princeton were also on display at a debate on the subject of “Postmodernist Classicism versus Narrative and De-construction in Architecture” which was sponsored by the graduate program in architecture and design criticism at the Parsons School of Design one evening last winter. Moderated by *Newsweek* architecture writer Douglas Davis, the debate was between the architect and architectural critic Charles Jencks and James Wines, an architect and chairman of the environmental design department at Parsons. Mr. Jencks is best known for his tireless proselytizing on behalf of postmodernism; it was he, in fact, who gave the term currency in the first edition of his book *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*. Mr. Wines—who first made his reputation as a sculptor in the Sixties—is the founder of SITE, an “architectural and environmental art group” formed in 1970 “for the purpose of exploring new ways to bring a heightened level of communication and psychological content to buildings, interiors, and public spaces.” He has emerged in recent years as one of the leading practitioners of deconstructivist archi-

tecture or (as he prefers to denominate it) “de-architecture.”

Mr. Jencks spoke first and presented himself as the champion of “postmodern classicism,” a phenomenon that he describes as the third stage of postmodernism. The first stage, according to his scheme, occurred in the 1960s and was essentially a reaction against the strictures of modernism; the second stage, which the 1970s ushered in, was a period of “pluralism and eclecticism.” Now, according to Mr. Jencks, mature postmodernism “has adopted a classical language.” In vocabulary somewhat reminiscent of Peter Eisenman (though it’s likely that the influence went the other way), Mr. Jencks described the modern secular world as shot through with a “nostalgia for the center.” In his view—and here he takes a very different position from Mr. Eisenman—architecture should seek to recover the center for our de-centered world. His prescription for this task is the frankly symbolic architecture of postmodern classicism.

This is not to say that postmodern classicism recovers any *actual* center—any binding social, religious, or philosophical order—but merely that it *plays* with the classical symbols of past systems in order to recapture the *aura* or illusion of belonging to a greater whole. Mr. Jencks enumerated various characteristics of postmodern classicism—its supposition that “disharmony is harmony,” for example, or the large role that wit and humor play in its concoctions—but his main point, a point that is illustrated in lavish detail in his new book on the subject,³ was that the deliberately historicizing symbolism employed by postmodern classicism can provide a quasi-spiritual answer to secular man’s real spiritual longings for order and meaning. While he distinguishes postmodern classicism from the “decorated sheds” of Robert Venturi—the symbolic ornamentation he has in mind is

3 *Towards a Symbolic Architecture: The Thematic House*, by Charles Jencks, with photographs by Richard Bryant; Rizzoli, 248 pages, \$40.

not just “stuck on” as it is in Venturi’s buildings—at bottom they amount to two versions of the same thing: both advocate arbitrarily applied ornamentation, but for Mr. Jencks the arbitrariness is half-concealed under the cloak of an elaborate and edifying symbol system.

Mr. Wines began his presentation by noting that he and Mr. Jencks share a concern with the “communicative or public nature of architecture,” but that they differed on the “sources” of communication. In many respects, Mr. Wines’s position is closer to Mr. Eisenman’s than to Mr. Jencks’s. Though not nearly as adept at manipulating language to provide camouflage as Mr. Eisenman, he nevertheless shares many of his basic suppositions about the situation of architecture in the contemporary world. For example, he concurs with Mr. Eisenman that postmodernism’s return to classical iconography is reactionary, and he indulges in a similar pre-packaged apocalyptic vision: “We now live in a time of universal melancholy and troubled dreams, a time of introspection and foreboding choices,” he writes in his recent book and credo, *De-architecture*.⁴ For Mr. Wines, too, it would seem that the chief task of architecture today is to dislocate and discommode. As he explains in his book, “De-architecture is a way of dissecting, shattering, dissolving, inverting, and transforming certain fixed prejudices about buildings, in the interests of discovering revelations among the fragments.” Like so many others these days, both Mr. Wines and Mr. Eisenman assume that *asserting* something about the aim or meaning of a building is tantamount to *accomplishing* it. But in art, as in life, there is often a great gap between assertion and accomplishment. A poorly designed dining room is meant to challenge the conventional “metaphysic of dining,” but is really only a poorly designed dining room; a dilapidated-looking building is meant to challenge our consumeristic “prejudices,” but is really just another ugly building.

Yet notwithstanding some rhetoric to the contrary, Mr. Wines differs from Mr. Eisenman in his continued adherence to the idea of architecture as an autonomous art. “De-architecture’s basic premise,” he writes, “is that art, not design, is the supreme mission of a building, and that the creative process must be revised to reflect this objective.” In fact, looking through his book and considering the work of SITE, it soon becomes clear that while Mr. Wines has given up the title of sculptor, his ambition has remained essentially sculptural: SITE’s installations are basically large environmental sculptures, some of which happen to be habitable.⁵

Not that he doesn’t have large, existential

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- 5 Probably SITE’s best-known architectural works to date are the eight showrooms designed for Best Products Company. Under the patronage of Sydney and Frances Lewis, prominent collectors of contemporary art and owners of Best Products, SITE has designed façades incorporating the principles of de-architecture. The “Indeterminate Façade” (1975) showroom in Houston, for example, “appears to be arrested somewhere between construction and demolition,” with a pile of brick punched from the top of the building and cascading down onto the entrance canopy. A more radical, and as yet unbuilt, project is the “Highrise of Homes.” In Mr. Wines’s words, this “visionary and traditional” idea provides “a matrix of housing choices” for city dwellers. Consisting of a large U-shaped steel and concrete grid eight to fifteen stories tall, the “Highrise of Homes” is meant to provide modules in which individuals could build single family houses in the style of their choice—modern, colonial, Tudor, Greek Revival, you name it. The houses on each level, clustered into “villagelike compounds,” would have access to a central elevator and core mechanical services. “The Highrise of Homes,” Mr. Wines writes, “is based on the premise that people will benefit from the personal affirmation and territorial definition associated with the detached house, even if it is in the compressed environment of a multistory building.” In reality, of course, the “Highrise of Homes” would be a grotesque architectural nightmare, as patronizing to its prospective inhabitants as it is stylistically meretricious.

4 *De-architecture*, by James Wines; Rizzoli, 192 pages, \$40.

ambitions for SITE's projects. "Rarely," he writes, "have contemporary buildings come close to the kind of sociological and psychological content expressed in, say, a Beckett play, a Magritte painting, or a Chaplin film." Clearly he looks to SITE to supply this content. But what do Mr. Wines's examples tell us about his conception of architecture? Is the sort of "sociological and psychological content" to which he alludes something we would wish to find embodied in our buildings? Think of it: an office building that reminded one of *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame*, a home as unsettling as a Magritte painting, a factory as zany as a film by Charlie Chaplin. Does it sound like a wonderful idea? Note that Mr. Wines suggests that this paucity of "sociological and psychological content" is a particular problem for contemporary buildings. Are we then to assume that older buildings possess a greater measure of such "content"? Chartres Cathedral is one of Mr. Wines's favorite architectural monuments from the past; he discusses it at length as a model of "narrative" architecture. Does Chartres, then, "come close to the kind of sociological and psychological content expressed in, say, a Beckett play, a Magritte painting, or a Chaplin film"?

In the end, Mr. Wines emerges as a kind of anemic, halfhearted imitation of someone like Mr. Eisenman; he mimics a good deal of radical rhetoric but his emphasis on communication binds him to a rather traditional humanistic sentiment; and though SITE's projects are among the most arrogant and high-handed I have seen in recent years, they do not really express the kind of fundamental challenge to traditional architectural practice that Mr. Eisenman, for example, advocates. Quite different is the position preached by Mr. Jencks. For where Messrs. Wines and Eisenman are nihilists in the apocalyptic mode, Mr. Jencks is a happy nihilist. Like his colleagues—at least, like Mr. Eisenman—he assumes that the modern secular world has lost any compelling foundation for shared social meaning; but unlike them, he has no scruples about fabricating a

false foundation out of promiscuous fragments gathered from the past. Mr. Jencks's basic message seems to be: if we cannot overcome the modern world, at least we can forget it.

The saccharine, archaizing spirit at work in Mr. Jencks's latest version of postmodernism is on full view in his new book, *Towards A Symbolic Architecture: The Thematic House*. Beginning with a chapter called "Fables for our Time," Mr. Jencks advocates "the conscious reassertion of the symbolic programme, the idea that every client and architect should make up an iconographic contract as explicit as their economic one" as "first steps in a new tradition, or perhaps the revival of an old one." Not surprisingly, words like "fable" and "parable" are featured in his exposition, and he sprinkles his text with lots of fake Latin names, capitalized abstract nouns, and deliberately archaic drawings with legends like "meaning triumphs over time."

After some general considerations about the troubled place of architecture in a secular world, Mr. Jencks reviews three of his own architectural projects, including one that incorporates the texts of Milton's poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* as mood-setters and thematic pointers for a house and garden in California. But the bulk of the book is devoted to an examination of "The Thematic House," Mr. Jencks's extraordinary renovation of an 1840s London townhouse for himself and his family. Beginning with the front door, which sports cleverly stylized initials of each of the family members, the whole house is an elaborate confection of symbolic motifs. The main downstairs rooms are each associated with one or another of the seasons and are decorated accordingly: spring, summer, Indian summer, autumn, and winter; "Winter" boasts a fireplace designed by Michael Graves. Inside the front door, there is a mirrored room that Jencks dubs the Cosmic Oval, in which the two main themes of the house—cosmic time and cultural time—are given preliminary expression in a mural showing, in Mr. Jencks's words, the "evolution of the galaxies

after the Big Bang.” There is also a portrait frieze painted by William Stok depicting a dozen cultural “paragons,” including the emperor Hadrian, and Thomas Jefferson conversing with Hannah Arendt. In the bathroom on the ground floor—the Cosmic Loo, in Jencks’s terminology—we have a complicated paint scheme with “light greys below, bright multi-colors in the middle and infinite cosmic gloom above, as in Westminster Cathedral.”

Then there is the central staircase, the Solar Stair, whose spiral is meant to recall “spiral galaxies, DNA, cyclical motion,” according to Mr. Jencks. It is also an abstract representation of the solar year: cast in concrete, its fifty-two steps, each of which is inscribed with seven grooves, make a grand total of three hundred and sixty-five “days.” *The Black Hole*, a mosaic by Eduardo Paolozzi at the bottom of the stairs, is meant to symbolize cosmic gloom or something, and on and on it goes, every room in the house weighted down with its load of symbols and inscriptions.

As Mr. Jencks himself has pointed out, there has always been a large element of Camp in postmodernist architecture. But with his “Thematic House” and theory of symbolic architecture, Mr. Jencks has gone beyond Camp and pushed postmodernism firmly in the direction of kitsch. The difference is that where the Camp sensibility retains sufficient self-consciousness to play with the sentimentalized products of bad taste, the kitsch sensibility *surrenders* to them and to the sentimentalized version of reality they promise. Hitherto, postmodernist architecture was funny on purpose; with his “Thematic House,” Mr. Jencks is only unintentionally so. Though he occasionally warns the reader about the dangers of aestheticism in the course of his book, his

entire presentation is little more than a recipe for an exquisitely aestheticized—and exquisitely expensive—brand of kitsch.

Between the ironic skepticism of Mr. Eisenman and the cloying sentimentalizations of Mr. Jencks there is not much to choose. It is difficult to say which impulse, if either, will assume dominance in architecture. Since sentimentality exercises a seemingly inextinguishable appeal, one might think of betting on Mr. Jencks. But as has often been pointed out, ours is an ironic age, and the appeal of the radical skepticism preached by Mr. Eisenman and others should not be underestimated. The Museum of Modern Art, at any rate, would seem to be backing the latter movement with its exhibition of “Deconstructivist Architecture,” which includes work by Messrs. Eisenman, Gehry, and five other architects whose work self-consciously explores architectural disharmony and fragmentariness. Hailed as the successor to Mr. Johnson’s path-breaking “International Style” exhibition of modernist architecture in 1932, “Deconstructivist Architecture” has been the subject of great controversy from the moment it was announced this winter. Since the museum refused to release the text of the exhibition catalogue in advance—at least to *The New Criterion*—it is impossible to do more at this writing than speculate about the contents or intellectual presuppositions of the exhibition. Yet one cannot help remarking the splendid irony that Philip Johnson, the man who once championed the austere tenets of modernist architecture, should now return to the Museum of Modern Art as the curator of an exhibition openly devoted to undermining everything that modernist architecture stood for. As always with Mr. Johnson, the joke is on us.

Nature boy: the novels of Peter Matthiessen

by Bruce Bawer

Peter Matthiessen occupies a unique position in contemporary letters. In the more than three decades since the publication of his first book, a novel called *Race Rock* (1954), he has received a good deal of attention for his contributions to two seemingly very distinct literary genres. Some readers know him primarily for his fiction—especially for the two longest, most recent, and most accomplished of his five novels, *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (1965) and *Far Tortuga* (1975)—while some are more familiar with his nonfiction writings on man and nature, a dozen-odd books with titles like *The Cloud Forest*, *Under the Mountain Wall*, *The Tree Where Man Was Born*, and *The Snow Leopard*. His work in both genres has been awarded recognition at a high level: *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* and *The Tree Where Man Was Born* were each nominated for the National Book Award, and *The Snow Leopard* won it; in the past two years, moreover, Random House has done him the honor of reprinting all of his novels, and his most recent book of nonfiction, in a handsome, uniform series of Vintage paperbacks.¹ Patently, to even a cursory observer, this is an impressive, not to say prepossessing, résumé: how many living American

writers, after all, have distinguished themselves in two such disparate fields as natural history and the novel?

As one looks more closely at Matthiessen's oeuvre, however, these fields begin to seem less removed from one another; indeed, one comes to recognize that Matthiessen's two most estimable novels draw heavily upon his learning as a naturalist and anthropologist and his experience as an explorer. *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* is a beautifully shaped and elegantly written story of four ill-fated North American missionaries in the South American jungle; *Far Tortuga* is a formally innovative tale of an even more ill-fated Caribbean turtling expedition. Both novels are notable largely for Matthiessen's extremely convincing rendering of the sensibilities, dialogue, and folkways of, respectively, remote Niaruna tribesmen and Cayman Islands seamen; both are also distinguished by expert, evocative descriptions of land forms, tides, currents, flora, fauna, and sundry phenomena of nature. Conversely, such nonfiction volumes as *Men's Lives* (1986), an account of several generations of Long Island bass fishermen, rely strongly upon his considerable gifts for narrative, dialogue, and character development. It might fairly be said, as a matter of fact, that Matthiessen's singular quality as a writer resides essentially in his ability to combine his talents as a storyteller and a naturalist—something that he accomplishes, in his best books, in such an original and striking

1 *Race Rock* (306 pages, \$8.95); *Partisans* (184 pages, \$5.95); *Radtzer* (152 pages, \$5.95); *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (373 pages, \$6.95); *Far Tortuga* (408 pages, \$10.95); *Men's Lives* (288 pages, \$5.95).

manner that they test the boundaries of whichever generic territory they happen to inhabit.

Yet if Matthiessen's finest novels and non-fiction share many of the same strengths, they also share—in varying degrees—substantial weaknesses. Probably the most significant of these weaknesses is Matthiessen's tendency to romanticize the lives, customs, and beliefs of people more primitive than himself, whom he all but reveres for their supposed oneness with nature and closeness to God, and to regard civilization—Western civilization especially, and American civilization most of all—not only as a departure from nature and God but as a wholesale assault upon them. In *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, for instance, Matthiessen's principal purpose is to make us see that the four fictional American Protestant missionaries—Leslie and Andy Huben, and Martin and Hazel Quarrier—who think of themselves as bearing the light of God's truth and goodness into the pagan darkness of the jungle, are in fact the enemies of everything that is right and virtuous and godly in the reputedly savage Niaruna tribe. To the degree that they are wrapped up in their own culture and its assumptions and willfully ignorant of others, Matthiessen wants us to have contempt for the missionaries, to find them arrogant and pietistic and absurd. The worst offender is unquestionably Leslie Huben, the humorless, self-righteous leader of the mission. Huben—whose prudishness and parochialism, not to mention his outspoken anti-Romanism, are so pronounced as to strain one's credulity—is categorically incapable of understanding the Niaruna in the slightest: we are meant to understand that their nakedness, which he sees as obscene, has about it a purity which he cannot comprehend, and that their life in nature, which he imagines to be steeped in ignorance and superstition, has a harmony, and even a wisdom, which is utterly beyond his ken.

The other Americans in the book are intended to be admirable insofar as they come to respect the Niaruna ways and to

reject their own culture and its assumptions. Lewis Moon, for instance, an educated U.S. citizen of American Indian stock who abandons the grubby, godless South American town of Madre de Dios for life among the Niaruna, admires the tribesmen inordinately on this account: "He had never envied anything so much as the identity of these people with their surroundings, nor realized quite so painfully how displaced he had always been." The white American who finds it easiest of all to communicate with the Indians is the Quarriers' son, Billy, the only Caucasian whom the Niaruna do not hold in contempt; indeed, the Indians speak to Billy "naturally," as if he were one of them—and in a sense he is, as far as Matthiessen is concerned, for in this author's mind primitivism and innocence are inextricably bound together.

One problem with the *Weltanschauung* of this novel is that a double standard lies at its center: Matthiessen manifestly regards the white Americans' ethnocentrism—their insistence upon judging other cultures by their own—as a weakness, a mark of naïveté and arrogance and corruption; in the Niaruna, however, the same ethnocentrism is a virtue, a sign of integrity. Another problem is that, for all the energy that Matthiessen devotes to assailing the hypocrisy of the Hubens and Quarriers, it seems more than a little hypocritical of this well-to-do fellow (who was born in New York City, prepped at Hotchkiss, and was graduated from Yale) to write and publish a novel whose purpose is, in large part, to condemn the very civilization that made possible the creation of such a work. For however much he may find to admire in primitive people, and however refreshing it may be for an affluent upper-middle-class American adventurer to go galivanting in the wild occasionally, away from the telephone, the typewriter, and the general hubbub and complexity of civilized life, Matthiessen seems a tad too blithely oblivious of the fact that without the literary culture—not to mention the printing presses, distribution networks, and bookstores—which only a civilized society can provide,

there would be no *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, and he'd be a mute inglorious Matthiessen.

One wonders, furthermore, whether Matthiessen, for all his primitivist enthusiasm, would truly want someone he loves to exchange life in America for the sort of existence led by a typical member of a tribe like the Niaruna. In *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, he symbolically makes clear his view of white Americans by having Andy Huben, through her carelessness, pass influenza on to the local Indians, who, having no resistance to the virus, start perishing from the disease in droves. Yet this is a grossly unfair way of representing Western civilization, especially in its relation to medical matters—for Western learning has made possible vaccines, treatments, and cures for ailments that force most people like the Niaruna (Matthiessen's starry-eyed romanticizing of them notwithstanding) to lead lives that are truly nasty, brutish, and short. Would Matthiessen, it seems fair to ask, want his family to live without the benefits of Western medicine? And what of Western freedoms? For it is worth noting that although Matthiessen ridicules the American missionaries—and, by implication, the United States and the West in general—for their smug intolerance of other cultures, tolerance is, in point of fact, a peculiarly Western virtue, far more prevalent among civilized Western societies than among primitive tribes like the Niaruna.

Yet these facts do not prevent Matthiessen from writing, in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, a novel that might well be described as both an elegy and an indictment: an elegy, that is, for the Niaruna, as well as for all primitive peoples whose way of life is gradually disappearing from the face of the earth; and an indictment of the Western world, particularly the United States. For it is on American culture that Matthiessen places the brunt of the blame for the fading of primitive, nature-centered cultures, and it is America whose people, he would like us to believe, are at a farther remove from the true, the good, and the beautiful than primitive folk could ever be. To Matthiessen, the

steady eradication of primitive cultures is a major tragedy of our time, and America is the tragedy's principal villain.

Matthiessen continues to lament this development in his novel *Far Tortuga*, which chronicles a 1968 turtling expedition—an expedition that turns out to be the last—of a schooner called the *Lillias Eden*. Though the seven Cayman Islands seamen who comprise the bulk of the novel's dramatis personae are hardly as backward as the Niaruna, they too find their old ways to be in increasing danger of extinction. It is this extinction, as a matter of fact, for which the story of the *Lillias Eden*'s final voyage, and of the attrition of its nine-man crew, is plainly intended to be a metaphor. As Raib Avers, the ship's captain, observes,

Well, good men hard to get now for de sailin boat—de work is harder, and dey work in de night and in de day. De times is changin. You fellas wantin dis goddom progress cause you are lazy. I never wanted it some way, but I got to get on with life so I make my peace with it.

The reply of Junior Bodden (Speedy), one of the ship's hands: "Dass de way de world go—modern time, mon." These words—"modern time, mon"—become something of a refrain in the novel, consistently invoked as an explanation for everything from laziness and cruelty to the use of plastic cups instead of "dem good old blue tin coffee cups." Taking note of someone's selfishness, for instance, Speedy comments, "Modern time, mon. Every mon for hisself. Learn dat from school days." And then there's this exchange (in which Matthiessen skips a space, instead of using quotation marks and indenting, to indicate a change of speakers) regarding the promiscuity of Caymanian women:

Modern time, mon. Girls gets knocked up before you gets dere . . .

Well, Speedy, dey don't behave in dat manner in Caymans, I tellin you dat much—!

Cause you in de back time, Doddy, dey plenty of water between you and de world. But you just wait a while, you gone to see. Modern time, mon—dey ain't no place to hide.

Like the jungle lands of the Niaruna, the Cayman Islands are an outpost of relative primitivism whose primitive days are numbered. Although they are not highly educated in a contemporary Western sense, we are meant to recognize that the islanders on the *Lillias Eden*, like the members of the Niaruna tribe, know a great deal about the things that really matter to their lives—about the sea, about the islands, about the history of their people. The crewmen also know—or, at least, most of them do—who is most responsible for the modern ways that represent such a threat to their old ways: the United States. Although there are no Americans in *Far Tortuga*, America itself is a very strong presence in the book. The crewmen complain, for instance, that because of America “tourist boats foul in the sea,” the fishing off Grand Cayman is not what it used to be: “an honest mon can’t hardly find a fish no more along de island.” The captain complains that most of his sons, lured by the money to be made in the States or in the American tourist trade, don’t want to follow the family tradition and become turtlers: “dey like de big ships better . . . dey all abandon in dere home, dey livin up dere in Tampa and Miami.” To Matthiessen, it would seem, this exodus of young people is a tragic trend—the heirs of a magnificent local tradition, in his view, are being drawn away from their beautiful native island and their glorious customary ways by the false promises and cheap glitter of that environmentally unsound monster, America. But anyone with a modicum of respect for the common sense of these young Cayman Islanders, and (in particular) for their ability to make sensible decisions about their lives, has to recognize that there must be good reasons why these people packed up and removed to the United States. Wouldn’t it be interesting, in fact, if instead of writing *Far Tortuga* (which was inspired, reported-

ly, by a Caribbean turtling expedition on which he tagged along), Matthiessen had looked up a few of those Cayman Islands emigrants, taken a serious look at their lives and choices, and written a novel about *that*?

To be sure, the complaints of the islanders in *Far Tortuga* about American tourist boats, and about young people “abandon in dere home,” seem believable enough. But at times the men’s remarks about America ring false, and one is aware of the presence of Matthiessen behind it all, pulling the strings, eager to magnify the U.S. into a symbol of fatuous, menacing power. Consider, for example, the following discussion of an American installation on Swan Island:

One time I was over to Swan Island; went up dere to de weather station. Couldn’t come near, dem Yankees got so many bad dogs to keep you off.

Spies, mon. Got spies in Caymans, too, most likely.

What dey spy on at Swan Island? De sprat birds? Used to be de Glidden family raise plenty nice cattle over dere—now de Yankees in dere with bad dogs!

Bad dogs protect de spies, mon. One thing spies don’t like, and dat is people spyin on dem. Oh, dey *hates* dat, mon!

Well, what dem Yankees doin is, dey broadcastin to Cuba—we heard all dem spies yellin at de time of de Bay of Pigs. Got dem bad dogs dere to keep people off while dey tellin de Cubans what de s’posed to be thinkin about Cuba. After dey gets done with dat, dey tell dem all about de land of de free and de home of de brave.

Elsewhere, Speedy complains that the captain of an American shrimp boat he once worked on called him a Communist for suggesting that he give away a quantity of unmarketable small shrimp to poor people. A fellow crewman named Vernon responds with a belligerent and rather pathetic tirade

against Communism, saying that “if I was de President of de United States of America, I’d give de order to bomb out every last one of dem goddom Cubans . . . make de world safe for democracy, goddom it! And *God!* . . . And dem dirty goddom commonists comin in dere and tellin me what I must do! *No*, mon! Tellin a *free* mon what he must do? *NO*, mon.” Matthiessen has the captain put Vemon in his place: “Free mon! Listen to dat idiot! . . . You a *stupid* mon, Vemon! You just de kind dem people need! Squawk in out everything dey tell you on de Yankee radio like some kind of a goddom parrot!” Clearly we’re supposed to see the wisdom in the captain’s reply; and, just as clearly, there aren’t going to be any intelligent, articulate anti-Communist voices raised in *this* forum. It is only when Matthiessen has his characters talk about such matters that their conversations sound less than genuine. For all his skill at conveying their sensibilities and capturing the sounds of their voices, Matthiessen apparently can’t help using these men, from time to time, as mouthpieces for his own anti-Americanism.

For the most part, however, the dialogue in *Far Tortuga* convinces. As my quotations from the novel indicate, this dialogue does not take a conventional form; nor, for that matter, does the novel as a whole. Doubtless in an attempt to keep the American voice and sensibility as muted as possible, Matthiessen keeps the conventional narrative passages to a minimum, letting the all-Caribbean cast speak for itself whenever feasible. Matthiessen intrudes mostly to provide us with objective data—the names and physical descriptions of characters, the time of day, the ship’s position—and various details of local color (“New sun on a vermillion fence. Breadfruit and tamarind”). The novel is broken up not into paragraphs but into larger and smaller blocks of type—sentences, fragments, individual words—with varying amounts of white space between them. Matthiessen’s narrative passages run, in conventional fashion, from margin to margin, while the characters’ dialogue is indented at the left and ragged on the right;

various individual words and crabbed phrases—the precise meaning and purpose of which are often obscure—appear every now and then, hovering in mid-page or thereabouts, as do certain recurring graphics: small filled and unfilled circles to indicate night and noon respectively; an ink-splattered circle to indicate a death. A two-page spread early in the novel contains a blueprint of the *Lillias Eden*; another page consists of the ship’s manifest; a third page contains nothing but the single word “horizon” and a faint horizontal line; several other pages contain nothing but rough pen strokes to indicate the rough waters of the Misteriosa Reefs. It must be said that, off-putting as all this may appear to a casual bookshelf browser, the unusual form of *Far Tortuga* is surprisingly successful, if in a rather limited way; though the novel does not add up to the powerful allegory that Matthiessen may have wished it to be, it does pass muster as a striking impressionistic work of a minor order, rich in discrete natural images and in the sounds of native voices.

Despite the diverse attractions and distractions of their respective styles and forms, however, one comes away from both *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* and *Far Tortuga* thinking less about manner than about matter. One is, for instance, bemused by the powerful antagonisms that inform both of these novels: antagonisms toward America, toward Western civilization, toward the Christian God (or, at least, toward what Matthiessen thinks Christians in the West, and especially Protestants in the U.S., have made of him—namely, a distant, austere First-World boss-man). These same antagonisms, it should be noted, inform much of Matthiessen’s nonfiction; behind one innocuous-sounding title after another there crouches an author itching to pounce on his prey. *Wildlife in America* (1959), for instance, proves to be a history of “the white man’s effect on wildlife in North America, from the earliest records to the present day.” (Hint: it’s not a *good* effect.) *Indian Country* (1984) is aptly described in its jacket copy as

an exploration of “ten important instances where the white man’s encroachments upon the sacred grounds of Indian tribes show the tragic effects of a confrontation that is bound to harm both sides . . .” Then there’s *Nine-Headed Dragon River: Zen Journals 1969-1982* (1986), an exceedingly peculiar work in which Matthiessen attempts to explain how Zen has brought him the joy of enlightenment. Matthiessen carries on breathlessly about “mystical perception,” “the beginningless potential of all things,” “the eternal rising and perishing reality of the world,” and the “realization of one’s own Buddha-nature”; he tells us that “[i]n zazen, one is one’s present self, what one was, and what one will be, all at once”; and he reverently quotes one after another of his Zen teachers: “‘The sun is shining; the sun is *always* shining. The sun is enlightenment; *everything* is enlightenment!’” More than anything else he has written, the Zen journals vividly reflect the profundity and perverseness of Matthiessen’s antagonism toward America, toward Western civilization, and toward the Christian idea of God; to read them is a tiresome and dismaying experience. Indeed, when one realizes that they recall nothing so much as Shirley MacLaine’s goofy testament *Out on a Limb*, they strike one as truly pathetic: what can it be, one wonders, that led this genuinely intelligent and supremely well-educated man, this veritable scion of Western civilization, this Yale graduate, to reject the riches of Western philosophy, religion, and culture in so dramatic, so *desperate*, a manner? Could he truly have found that legacy so useless, so empty, so incapable of addressing his own questions about life, death, and the cosmos? Or was he driven to Zen—and to immersion in this whole range of non-Western cultural and social phenomena—by some more subjective need, some irrational private anguish?

Perhaps, perhaps not. But the more one reads Matthiessen, the more one cannot help connecting these antagonisms to one which—though I have not yet mentioned it—also figures prominently in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* and *Far Tortuga*. I am

speaking of an antagonism toward fathers. Though not manifested as explicitly in these novels as are the other antagonisms, this antagonism is, in both books, quite important thematically. Consider *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, a father-son story in more ways than one. For instance, the novel tells the story of a son (Billy Quarrier) who proves to be much more in harmony with the Indians, with nature, and with God than his missionary father (Martin Quarrier). It is also the story of Lewis Moon and his mixed emotions about his Cheyenne father, whom he once taunted for serving in World War I and called a “mongrel white.” *Far Tortuga* is likewise very much concerned with fathers and sons. Captain Raib carries aboard his ship not only his father, “Capn Andrew,” but his seventeen-year-old son, Jim Eden (a.k.a. Buddy). As one of the crewmen observes, Buddy (who has never before served on a ship’s crew) is an “old fashion boy” who “love his doddy” and who, unlike his many brothers, wants very much to follow in the old man’s footsteps; however hard he tries to please his father, though, Captain Raib (who can’t even remember his son’s name) offers little in return but complaints and insults:

Why you standin dere? Nothin to do? You know dat de bilges ain’t been pumped dis mornin, and you ain’t took Copm Andrew to de rails so he might ease hisself, and you know dere is ropes to splice and ends to whip up and down de ship (*his voice rises*) and you standin dere starin at me! (*points*) DEY MEN OUT DERE RISKIN DERE LIVES!

Noticing these parallels, one begins to wonder: is Matthiessen, in his two most recent novels, engaged in working out some sort of longstanding personal conflict regarding his own father? Do his antagonisms toward America, Western civilization, and the Christian God—all of them symbols of authority, equivalent in the subconscious mind with the father—represent instances of transference of this father-related conflict? Are his enthusiasms for Third World primi-

tive cultures, for nature, and for Eastern religion, accordingly, a form of rebellion against the idea of the father, and against the very concept of fatherly authority?

This may be an audacious notion, but it is one that inevitably occurs to the alert reader of Matthiessen's most celebrated novels. And a perusal of Matthiessen's first three not-so-celebrated novels would seem to support the hypothesis. But the first thing to be said about these volumes—*Race Rock* (1954), *Partisans* (1955), and *Radtzer* (1961)—is that they hardly belong in the same discussion as *At Play* and *Far Tortuga*. They might, indeed, be categorized most accurately as apprentice works, as the creations of a young man who has yet to learn how—and how not—to draw upon his real-life emotions in the course of manufacturing full-length serious fictions. (It should be noted that Matthiessen, born in 1927, was still in his early thirties when his third novel was published.) To put it more bluntly, these are terrible books, in which Matthiessen's preoccupations are more baldly and crudely set forth than in *At Play* and *Far Tortuga*. But they do seem worth looking at, if only because of the harsher, less subtle light they shed on those preoccupations.

And what *is* Matthiessen preoccupied with in these early novels? Well, with a number of things: the passing of childhood, the nature of friendship, young love and its discontents. But at the center of each of these three books lies a single conflict: a privileged young man's antagonism toward his affluent and powerful father. In *Race Rock* the young man is George McConville, a New York stockbroker who, we learn, grew up in Manhattan (as did Matthiessen) as well as a New England village; there he became part of a small circle of young people, two of them (Sam Rubicam and Eve Murray) the children of well-heeled city folk, two (Daniel Barleyfield and Cady Shipman) the offspring of dirt-poor locals. The novel flashes back continually to the key episodes of these characters' shared childhood and early youth, from the perspective of what we are appar-

ently meant to recognize—in the cases of George, Sam, and Eve, anyway—as a tragically jaded adulthood (even though they're all barely into their mid-twenties). The point of these flashbacks? To underline these rich kids' lost innocence, their removal from the rural demesne which poor boys like Daniel and Cody continue to inhabit. (Matthiessen hammers away at this theme with breathtaking heavy-handedness: "childhood escaped them like a breath, and with it, innocence.") But it's impossible to care much about what George and company have lost, mainly because neither George nor Matthiessen has any perspective on the situation; we are plainly meant to view this loss as tragic, and to recognize that in some vague way George's wealthy father is responsible for it all. If George feels "unbearably oppressed," in other words, it is because he finds it "fatuous to work for *more* money . . . fatuous to fill the shoes of the man [George's father] who had crushed by his own example the incentive to do so." Poor kid!

Edwin (Barney) Sand, the young, Paris-based American reporter who is the protagonist of the slender novel *Partisans*, also has a powerful father. (Matthiessen, let it be noted, studied at the Sorbonne in 1948-49, and after his 1950 graduation from Yale returned to the French capital to help found the *Paris Review*.) Here, as in *Race Rock*, Matthiessen flashes back to the hero's childhood—specifically, to a day in 1938, when Sand's father, an American consul in Spain, took his wife and fourteen-year-old son out of that war-torn country into France, and a notorious Communist party leader named Jacobi hitched a ride. Now, fifteen years later, Jacobi having reportedly been expelled from the Party and confined somewhere in Paris by Party officials, Sand undergoes several bizarre, increasingly disordered days and nights in the homes of various agents and counteragents, awaiting a reunion with Jacobi, whom he has not spoken with since that first meeting; like George McConville, he is "searching for . . . something-to-believe-in." We are expected to accept the notion that Sand's brief youthful encounter with

Jacobi changed the boy's life, making him aware for the first time that he belonged to a wealthy minority, and that "his way of life, however innocent, was built on selfishness and wrong." As a result of this encounter, the boy learned to feel guilty about having servants, became a newspaperman instead of joining his dad in the foreign service, and took the regular-guy nickname of Barney (a name that his father refuses to acknowledge); indeed, Jacobi became a veritable father figure to Sand, to a large extent supplanting his real father, whom Sand continues to identify with the forces of "selfishness and wrong" and to blame for making him an unwilling part of it all.

None of this is any more believable than it sounds, and it doesn't help that, as in *Race Rock*, Matthiessen goes in for purple prose ("This was the hour of solitude, Sand thought, of ultimate reality"), muses insipidly about innocence ("the boy peered down at war, and, innocent, saw only the slow smoke of it, silent, without smell"), proffers corny dialogue ("Love . . . There are times when it seems as inevitable as air"), and spells out his symbolism ("Rudi Gleize . . . represented the labyrinth beneath the desolate scene of postwar Europe"). As in *Race Rock*, too, Matthiessen behaves as if the protagonist's silly rich-boy problem is tragic in its dimensions and universal in its implications; it doesn't ever occur to him that a young man who has made a father image out of someone he met for a couple of hours at age fourteen is not a compelling symbol of postwar alienation and confusion but a pitiful case of arrested development.

In the slim novel *Raditzer*, the privileged young protagonist is Charlie Stark, who atones for his affluence—and escapes "his predestined future in his father's Portland law firm, a future as inexorable . . . as death"—by enlisting in the Navy. Like Sand, Charlie has had it out with his father (who is essentially a retread of George's Philistine dad) over the issue of privilege; the outcome of the argument is a compromise: Charlie goes to college and studies art and pre-law simultaneously. (Not that he has a very

strong interest in art; no, Matthiessen seems to take it for granted that we recognize, as he does, that one of the important functions of the arts is to provide a way for rich boys to rebel against their parents.) It is in 1945, on a Hawaii-bound troopship, that Charlie meets Raditzer, an enlisted man whom Matthiessen tries to build into a symbol of evil—unsuccessfully, for Raditzer, as depicted here, is not evil, merely sleazy and vulgar (and not nearly as interesting as Matthiessen seems to think). Oddly, Matthiessen also seems to regard Raditzer as an archetypal white American common man, a pendant to rich-boy Stark—thus positing an equation of evil and the American underclass that should give one pause. It is, we are apparently supposed to believe, the subtle influence of Raditzer that causes Charlie to cheat on his wife with an "unspoiled native girl" whose "animal warmth" he finds irresistible; on the heels of this liaison, Charlie returns to the mainland, knowing that his future with his wife "would be at best that compromise with life which, like death itself, happened only to other people."

Obviously, Matthiessen is altogether too quick, in these feeble early novels of his, to compare his protagonists' relatively minor woes with death. After all, the only problem that George McConville, Barney Sand, and Charlie Stark have, when you get right down to it, is that they don't really *have* any problems. Matthiessen almost admits as much himself, when discussing Charlie's reasons for joining the Navy:

He [Charlie] had only wanted to go, to get away. What he wanted to flee, where he wished to go—these questions were much less clear, for his life was pleasant. There was really nothing to rebel against. Perhaps that was part of it, the fatness of it all, the comfortable assumptions, the infallibility of "good family."

Comfort, pleasantness, "good family": these, in sum, are the things that all the heroes of Matthiessen's early novels are rebelling against. Needless to say, there's something unconvincing about making use of this as a

theme for an entire novel. Indeed, the self-fascination implicit in a novelist's choice of such a topic is itself downright offensive; these early novels depict a world in which everything is so wildly out of proportion that World War II (in *Raditzer*) and the Cold War (in *Partisans*) hardly seem to exist at all, except as they affect the trivial conflicts of Matthiessen's protagonists. Why does Stark join the Navy? To "get away," we're told, as if World War II were a fortnight's trip to the Riviera to get away from Daddy for a bit. In fact, it hardly seems an exaggeration to say that, though these early novels are patently supposed to be meditations on privilege, the author's own unself-consciousness narcissism itself provides a far more devastating, if inadvertent, commentary upon the privileged-boy mentality than Matthiessen could ever intentionally have mounted.

Which leaves only one question—namely, what happened, after the publication of these first three novels, to change the direction and scope of Matthiessen's fiction so dramatically? The answer is simple: he found (to borrow his own terminology) something to rebel against. Or, more accurately, he dis-

covered a more sophisticated and a less solipsistic means of drawing fiction out of his tirelessly persistent impulses toward filial rebellion. The chronology is revealing: it was in the late Fifties that Matthiessen made the earliest of his many journeys into the wild, and it was in 1959 and 1961—the same years in which *Partisans* and *Raditzer* appeared—that he published his first volumes of natural history. In these books Matthiessen celebrates his discovery of the non-civilized, non-American world. But, as one can see quite clearly in retrospect, he is doing something more: he is laying the foundation for a kind of novel that, while rejecting the civilized Western milieu of his first three novels and moving beyond their numbing preoccupation with the Oedipal conflicts of privileged young men, would draw its inspiration from the same emotions that informed the earlier books. In *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* and *Far Tortuga*, accordingly, the much-resented father became subsumed into America, into Western civilization, into the Christian God; and an uncritical reverence for nature—and for the supposed childlike innocence of those who live in it—took the place of his sometime absorption in an inordinately puerile self.

Demuth at the Whitney

by William C. Agee

In recent years the American painter Charles Demuth (1883-1935) has not commanded the kind of public attention he once did. Yet of all our early modernists, none was held in higher esteem by his fellow artists. Two of our greatest modern painters, Marsden Hartley and Stuart Davis, expressed their deep respect and admiration for him. "Charles loved the language of paint," noted Hartley in 1935, shortly after Demuth's death at the age of fifty-two. And indeed, in Demuth's hands, the language of paint is truly compelling. Hartley's further observation that Demuth "never made a bad picture" seems true as well, at least in the watercolors and temperas (the oils are another matter). Thus it was with unusual interest that one approached the Demuth retrospective organized by Barbara Haskell last fall for the Whitney Museum of American Art.¹ Given Demuth's immense achievement, one had hoped to proceed easily and happily through

the Whitney show; and in fact many visitors did just that, for the exhibition offered sufficient rewards to make it an event of considerable significance. But for others, nagging doubts began to set in not even halfway through, and by the end the show proved to be badly flawed. Unfortunately, the catalogue only reinforced one's feeling of disappointment.

The problem began with the museum building itself, for the unyielding concrete and stone of the Whitney are antithetical to Demuth's watercolors; and the ceiling and dark floors simply swallow up the available light. In this murky ambience, it was hard to see the pictures, even after adjusting for the low levels of light that works on paper always require. The installation was no better. The scale and character of Demuth's watercolors are best served by an installation of careful and sensitive groupings in discrete, well-defined spaces. At the Whitney, the installation was of a Camp, postmodern design, with unneeded wall windows punctuating mazelike corridors. At the end of the show, the late watercolors were strung out along a long wall running the entire width of the gallery floor. The installation thus blurred these glorious works and ultimately cancelled their myriad nuances.

That no particular thought was given to the special character of Demuth's art became obvious when the Whitney's next show, the Charles Sheeler exhibition (organized by the Museum of Fine Arts in Bos-

1 "Charles Demuth" was on display at the Whitney Museum from October 15, 1987 through January 17, 1988. In addition to organizing the show, Barbara Haskell, a curator at the Whitney, wrote the catalogue (published by the Whitney with Harry Abrams, 240 pages, \$40). The exhibition was at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from February 25 through April 24 and is currently on display at the Columbus Museum of Art in Ohio through July 10; from there it travels to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (August 7 through October 2).

ton), was installed in *exactly the same layout*. Even the lighting was similar: the same dim conditions prevailed. Has it come to this, in this technological age of interchangeable parts, that we now have interchangeable installations, even interchangeable artists? Demuth wrote in 1929: "Paintings must be looked at and looked at . . . They, I think, the good ones, like it. They must be understood . . . through the eyes." After seeing the Whitney show, the irony of these words was all too sad. Do the curators believe that no one notices?

It is hard to say what the definitive version of the Demuth show was meant to include, since the contents varied at each stop on the exhibition's tour; in any case there was an ample selection of the vaudeville, literary, and still-life watercolors, and a few explicit homosexual scenes. A special feature of the show was the inclusion of seven poster portraits in oil, done between 1923 and 1928. With the exception of *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold*, these are more in the nature of intellectual riddles or curiosities than triumphs of painting. All of the most important precisionist oils of the Twenties were in place. Seeing them again, we felt confirmed in what we had long believed—that, with few exceptions, they are not the equal of the watercolors; and the oils of the Thirties are uninspired. Demuth was aware of his difficulties with the medium. "I need help when I paint with oil colour," he wrote to Stieglitz in 1928. In part the late oils reflect Demuth's failing health (he was suffering from the diabetic condition that eventually killed him); but they also remind us of just how much more at home Demuth was in watercolor, and of just how different these two mediums are. If the matter was ever in doubt, the show confirmed that Demuth's gift lay with water-based paints.

Demuth's output of watercolors was so extensive—he did about a thousand—and his level of achievement so consistently high that, at first, the selection of watercolors in the Whitney show seemed adequate. But several glaring gaps soon became apparent.

At least two dozen of Demuth's greatest watercolors were missing. It does not take a Demuth specialist to note, for example, the absence of the famous 1920 watercolor from the Museum of Modern Art, *Stairs, Provincetown*, or of the 1921 *Roofs and Steeples* from the Brooklyn Museum. These are two crowning glories of Demuth's architectural watercolors, and they have always seemed to me to define his mastery of Cubism. The theme and handling of *Stairs, Provincetown*—the exactitude of its form makes it seem like a re-take of *Nude Descending A Staircase*—may also help to explain Demuth's attachment to the art of Marcel Duchamp. Unfortunately, Barbara Haskell never really addresses this crucial issue in her catalogue essay, except in terms of sexual imagery. Nor does she point out that *Stairs, Provincetown* may well have been a source for Sheeler's use of stairways. The relationship between the work of the two artists—a question raised by James W. Lane as long ago as 1936 and by Sherman Lee in 1942—is not peripheral to our understanding of Demuth.

Complaining about the missing works in the Whitney show is more than a matter of quibbling over the absence of a few personal favorites: the list is too long and varied. Where is the extraordinary 1925 *Apples and Green Glass* from the Art Institute of Chicago, surely one of the greatest of Demuth's still lifes? Or, since inexplicably there are no still-life watercolors from after 1930 included in the show, where is the magnificent *Iris* of 1933 from the Wolfe Collection, or *Daffodils*, also from 1933, from a private collection in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Demuth's hometown? The 1925 *Bowl of Oranges* from the Columbus Museum at least made it into the Columbus and San Francisco stops on the show's tour, but three other first-rate (perhaps even better) watercolors from the Howald Collection in Columbus were excluded altogether. Of the earlier vaudeville scenes, the sublime 1917 watercolor from the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth was missing; it is certainly one of Demuth's best.

In the absence of these works, it is impossible to understand the full extent of Demuth's powers. The postmodern disdain for the "peaks" of an artist's achievement—and for the necessity of judging between good, better, and best—is evident in the show's selection of watercolors. But this is not all. At the Whitney, we saw only two pictures from Demuth's work prior to 1914, although by that year he had been given a one-man show and was already held in high regard by two of the great dealers of the period, Alfred Stieglitz and Charles Daniel. Surely in a full retrospective it would have been useful to see something more of Demuth's early development, for there is clear evidence—a fine 1912 landscape at Amherst, for example—that Demuth had gained a great degree of accomplishment by this date, certainly more than Haskell is willing to grant him in her catalogue essay.

A matter of fundamental importance to any evaluation of Demuth's stylistic development is how, in 1916 and 1917, he evolved the distinctive Cubism of his architectural and landscape watercolors. There are only seven of these works in the show, however, too few for us to register the complexities of this evolution. The fine watercolors of this period from the Princeton and Harvard museums, from the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Art Institute of Chicago, from the Phillips Collection and the Lane Collection (in Leominster, Massachusetts), would have made a significant difference. They are nothing less than miracles in the art of watercolor painting and show us convincingly just how Demuth achieved a union of warm surface nuances within a rigorously defined, sharp-edged grid, a feat that even now defies our imagination. But these works are absent from the Whitney show. Haskell prefers the vaudeville and "literary" watercolors of these years because, as the catalogue makes clear, their more obvious content lends itself to the kind of pseudo-psychological interpretations she favors. Make no mistake, the figurative pictures are wonderful; one only wishes that an

appropriate weight had been given to an equally fine and important group.

As installed at the Whitney, the vaudeville and architectural watercolors were treated as clear and distinct types, a mistake I think, for something important about Demuth's approach and technique was lost in the process. Hartley understood that the transition from "illustrative subjects" to the Cubist pictures was "all one thing, and there is, therefore, a natural sequence in [Demuth's] product." The strong Cubist drawing of houses and landscape that appears on the curtain in the 1917 *Vaudeville Musicians* (MOMA), for example, as well as the meticulous geometric rendering of the stage floor, relates directly to the 1917 Cubist watercolors and looks ahead to the precision of *Stairs, Provincetown*. Further, the vaudeville scenes are often enveloped in circular patterns of light and color reminiscent of Synchronism and Orphism. These patterns create pronounced cycles of motion that tie them directly—if now in an urban format—to the organic patterns we find in Demuth's still lifes of fruit and flowers, as well as to the intermeshing shapes of trees and houses in the Cubist architectural motifs.

Some of the exhibition's failings were worse than others. Particularly regrettable was the total absence of any of the architectural watercolors or temperas from 1919, a glorious and pivotal year for Demuth. Curiously, three key works from this year (not in the show) are reproduced in the catalogue, and yet no mention is made of two of the best pictures from this year: *In the Key of Blue* from the Vincent Carrozza Collection in Dallas and the famous *A Sky After El Greco* at Arizona State University. There are other excellent paintings from 1919 at the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City and the museums of the University of Nebraska and the Rhode Island School of Design. All of those works are based on the interplay of sails and masts etched in a clear sky. They are technical marvels of color and Cubist complexity in which Demuth's fusion of ever-shifting areas of line and color seems to be the result of the most painstaking craftsmanship. It is

all too easy to forget that they were accomplished in the fugitive, elusive medium of watercolor, a one-shot method where one slip means failure. What is more, these works established a motif—of sails and sky—that soon appeared in the art of Stuart Davis, Man Ray, and Charles Sheeler. Davis in particular was affected by the schematic structure of Demuth's 1919 work; the influence is evident in Davis's linear Cubist formats of 1924 and 1932, the formats that informed so much of Davis's later art and that in turn influenced David Smith.

The selection at the Whitney had a leveling effect on Demuth. There were none of the offbeat, less typical images that fill out and define the full extent of his accomplishment. Without a full description, we miss his range, and this hurts him because he is not ostensibly a "big" artist who will immediately bowl us over. The work is too concentrated, too serious for that. The dense, oval *Still Life with Spoon*, ca. 1928, from the University of Georgia, or one or two more examples of the black ground watercolors, such as the 1919 *Primrose* in the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection, would have helped in this regard. The 1925 watercolor *Apples with Jug* (private collection), with its table top tilted to an almost fully vertical position (reminiscent of Juan Gris and Patrick Henry Bruce), would have gone a long way to defining just how far Demuth extended the Cubist vocabulary.

The Whitney's selection of oils was not exempt from a similar criticism. We missed *Spring* of 1921, a bright abstract painting in which the simulated patches of cloth may refer to the paint chips in Duchamp's 1918 *Tum'*. (It may also have been a source for Stuart Davis's collages, and for the famous tobacco-label paintings, all of the same year.) The 1930 tempera from Chicago, *Waiting*, with its curvilinear, arcing vents which re-present the movement of *Paquebot*, "*Paris*," would have offered a welcome relief from the rigidity of the late oils. Nor does the show have any of the partially finished works (Demuth thought them finished), in which extraordinary pencil draw-

ing is only partly completed with wash, or is accented by only a single color passage. These are daring and radical works, forcing us to test our understanding of the modern concepts of finish.

The Whitney also presented Demuth as if he has been an unappreciated artist, almost as if we were rediscovering him. The press releases claimed that the catalogue was the first "major book" on the artist and the "first substantive analysis." In the director's foreword, Tom Armstrong stated that Demuth's achievements "had never been fully studied." These are seriously exaggerated claims. More than virtually any other modernist, Demuth has been the subject of extensive and favorable criticism and study, beginning with Henry McBride's review of Demuth's first one-man show in 1914 and continuing without interruption until today. The valuable recent studies of Demuth by Betsy Fahlman, Jonathan Weinberg, Thomas Norton, Abraham Davidson, and Alvord Eisman are continuations of earlier work on Demuth by a diverse and notable group of historians and critics, including Willard Huntington Wright, Albert E. Gallatin, George L. K. Morris, Sherman Lee, Andrew Ritchie, S. Lane Faison, Kermit Champa, and Karal Ann Marling. At the heart of all this writing and study has been the work of Emily Farnham, whose 1959 dissertation and 1971 biography of Demuth are the core of Demuth studies.

Oddly, the Whitney's catalogue, although drawing extensively on these works, never really takes them into account, only mentioning them in footnotes. At the end of her catalogue, Barbara Haskell lists several "obstacles" that she believes have stood in the way of our having a full understanding of Demuth's achievement, but these are largely illusory, and Haskell's statement that only now can Demuth's art "at last be appreciated" ignores a long history of critical and scholarly praise. It is as if the huge bibliography on Demuth did not exist for her. When was Demuth not appreciated and praised? In 1917, Willard Huntington Wright

compared him to Matisse. In his classic study of 1942, Sherman Lee, our greatest museum director, ranked Demuth with Picasso, Braque, Nolde, and Toulouse-Lautrec as a master of watercolor painting. Haskell's assertions, that only now is watercolor considered a "major medium," or that figuration is only now a "legitimate area of exploration," are demonstrably false. Certainly the first assertion, on the status of watercolor, would come as news to Cézanne, Marin, and Winslow Homer. She also believes that only now can we reconcile the refinement of Demuth's watercolors with their inherent strength. But both George L. K. Morris, in 1938, and Sherman Lee, in 1942, put that old cliché decisively to rest. To be sure, we need to know more about the *exact* nature of Demuth's achievement, but the question is certainly not one of rediscovery.

Haskell's approach is biographical and psychological, rather than art historical, and contains admixtures of gender issues and sexual themes imbedded in discussions of "life styles" and "self-image." From the start, she insists on Demuth as an outcast who, because of his lameness and homosexuality, lived in a private world, as an introverted outsider who struggled to break away from the debilitating, provincial world of Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

This thesis is a terrible exaggeration. Reliable accounts from the period suggest a different picture, for they describe Demuth in his youth as a vigorous dancer and an excellent swimmer who led an active and outgoing social life. (Much later, he was weakened by the onset of diabetes, but that is another matter altogether.) Demuth was a cherished and respected member of the artistic community. Haskell wrongly ascribes a negative quotation about Demuth to Marcel Duchamp—about Demuth's being "tight-lipped"—when in fact it was made by William Carlos Williams, who was his best friend and could say such things. Duchamp lovingly described Demuth as straightforward and gentle, "with no malice in him." Duchamp did note his shyness, and spoke of a "curtain of

mental privacy," but it seemed not to detract from the healthy, outgoing relationships Demuth enjoyed. Most importantly, Duchamp emphasized that Demuth's homosexuality—"his perversion"—made no difference to his art. He may have overstated the case somewhat, but the essential truth remains.

The fond, admiring descriptions of Demuth given by Stuart Davis and others are a far cry from the "marginal" and "degenerate" existence Haskell ascribes to him. She goes so far as to describe Demuth as "depraved," a serious allegation that ignores something essential about this gentle, afflicted man. To prove his "depravity," Haskell points out that Demuth parted his hair in the middle, just as the Aesthetes did. Yet as I write, I see in the photograph of my grandfather's Harvard football team of 1895 that eleven of thirteen members parted their hair in the middle. Again, Marsden Hartley is a more reliable guide than Haskell. "Charles had a good time being himself," Hartley wrote. "Playtime was big business"—but, he added, only after Demuth's "office hours" as a painter were done.

The whole effect of Haskell's argument is to diminish Demuth as a person and artist rather than to define and illuminate his true stature. To support her "marginal-degenerate" theory, Haskell asserts that his early interest in art was "feminine" and that it helped to establish his "self-image" as an outcast. This because he decorated china and made drawings of flowers! Her thesis disregards the whole nineteenth-century tradition of porcelain decoration as a means of artistic training and financial support, a practice made famous by Renoir and Monet. Certainly the whole tradition of flower painting was never a matter of gender. Degas and Gauguin painted fans, but they weren't sissies.

Haskell also holds staunchly to the thesis that Lancaster was to Demuth as Egypt was to the Jews (thus the title of his famous 1927 painting, *My Egypt*)—a place in which he was imprisoned. This analogy was first proposed by Karal Ann Marling in 1980, yet Betsy Fahlman has convincingly argued

that Lancaster provided a strong base of emotional and financial security for Demuth, as well as giving the artist that sense of place and personal identity that is so evident in his art. This more accurate view of Lancaster supports the old and sensible thesis that Demuth equated the silos of Pennsylvania with the beauty and permanence of the pyramids. Lancaster, once a major inland city, is to this day a remarkably pleasant and civilized place, not the industrial wasteland that Haskell would have us believe. To be sure, Demuth knew its limitations and often remarked on them, for Lancaster, like most of America, was not especially interested in modern art. But Demuth found there a pattern of living and working that suited him well.

By choice, Demuth worked intensely at home in his small upstairs studio-bedroom, a place perfectly suited to the scale and intimacy of his art. There he could focus without distraction on the almost indescribably difficult task he had set for himself in his watercolors. And there he could draw on what he saw, what he knew, and what had nourished him all his life—the historic buildings of Lancaster that could be seen from his window and the rich array of flowers surrounding his mother's celebrated garden. He drew as well on the famous farmer's market in Lancaster, where the bounty of the fertile Pennsylvania countryside is still gathered three times a week. When he had expended his creative energy, he would then head for New York (as often as once a week, according to Duchamp) to indulge in the pleasures of urban nightlife and enjoy the company of his friends and fellow artists. This was not hard to do, since Lancaster was an easy commute to Philadelphia (not "almost" commutable, as Haskell says) and the trip to New York from Philadelphia (in the days of good rail service) was not arduous. Lancaster is not so culturally remote either, if we recall that Philadelphia, where Demuth studied and later frequently visited the museums, was an important center of modern art. It was the city of Eakins, and many of our leading

modern artists—Marin, Carles, Schamberg, and Sheeler among them—were born there and studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, where Demuth himself was trained.

After tiring of New York, Demuth would return to Lancaster and once again devote himself to his art with a single-minded intensity. This pattern of working near, but not in, New York is not such a bad idea, artistically speaking, as the careers of David Smith and Jackson Pollock later demonstrated. Far from being isolated and outcast in Lancaster, Demuth was in touch with the cultural life of the two great urban centers nearby, visited them regularly, and happily returned to a place more conducive to the making of his art.

It is not only Demuth's life but also his work that Haskell gets wrong. She gives little attention to the post-1924 watercolors because in her view "they reflected none of the intellectual search for American themes that had occupied him since 1920. Henceforth, oil alone would be the medium in which he experimented pictorially and in which he sought to encapsulate a truly American subject matter and style." This is absurd. To believe that there are no pictorial changes or experiments in the watercolors after 1925, or even after 1930, is tantamount to saying that one hasn't looked at them. (Even this would be better than actually looking at them and then coming up with this conclusion.) Indeed, Haskell's failure to come to grips with the later watercolors is the major flaw of her catalogue. These great works of art show a fascinating range of experimentation and change: they are at times compressed, even free-standing (with no supporting field or background), as in the work of 1929; or they are complex, dramatically vertical, as if architecturally structured, as in the work of 1933. They possess an ever more convincing sense of three dimensions while simultaneously forcing us to comprehend the delicate, elusive character of this perilous medium. We always feel that Demuth's searching, inquir-

ing mind and eye are in full play, trying to discover just how much art he could make from a minimum of shape, color, and line. The watercolors of the 1930s often are among Demuth's greatest accomplishments, and his achievement is seriously distorted by writing them off in this fashion.

The "American" issue also limits our perception of Demuth as a figure of international stature in watercolor painting. But why are the still lifes any less "American," or less "intellectual," than the oil paintings of Lancaster and Provincetown sites? We need only recall Meyer Schapiro's famous article on Cézanne's "solitary pictorial chess" to understand the role of intellect in still-life painting. John Wilmerding, in his writings on nineteenth-century American art, argues persuasively for still-life painting as a national style. Wilmerding describes the American still life as the evocation of the "palpable, real world," a world "rendered with precision and finesse." He could have been speaking of Demuth's work. Indeed, Demuth's late watercolor still lifes are, in their precision, the equivalent of his precisionist oils, only the still lifes are far better works of art. By neglecting them, Haskell never comes to grips with an important aspect of Demuth's artistic achievement. Rather, she holds to the traditional disdain for still-life painting and relegates Demuth's watercolors to a lesser role, even though they form the vast majority of his work.

Wilmerding has other things to say about American still-life painting that help us to understand Demuth. He draws a telling analogy between the pyramidal massing in Bulfinch's Federal architecture and the still lifes of Raphaelle Peale, pointing out forms in "graceful and economic balance" in both. He also relates still-life painting to Darwin and the processes of natural, organic growth, and to Thoreau with his detailed descriptions of flowers. He then characterizes Peto's still lifes as concerned with "America, autobiography and art." Could not this also be true of Demuth—with the order reversed? If we must seek a sense of national identity in them, could we not see Demuth's

bountiful still lifes reflecting a prosperous America, and the sometimes starker images of the 1930s reflecting the declining economic fortunes of the country, just as his own health was declining? In separating the "content" of the oils from the watercolors, Haskell makes the error of confusing an American subject matter with an American style. We badly need some assessment of Demuth in the history of still-life and watercolor painting. Barbara Haskell gives us virtually nothing of substance in this regard.

Haskell's catalogue dwells at length on the sexual side of Demuth's life—especially on the sexual mores of the New York art world and nightlife that Demuth frequented with Duchamp, Davis, and others. Rather than discuss Duchamp's influence on Demuth's art, she speculates on their common use of sexual—that is, Freudian—imagery. This leads to statements such as "Duchamp was not the only artist in the Arensberg group to be preoccupied with sex." Pages are spent on this sort of thing while in the same chapter only a few lines are given to Demuth's beautiful fish watercolors of 1916-17, works that are almost unknown yet a real high point of watercolor painting. It should be said that Haskell's references to Freud are not new, for Emily Farnham devoted a long chapter in her 1959 study to a Freudian interpretation of Demuth and his work. In any event, Haskell spends too much time "interpreting" the sexually explicit watercolors. Whatever the value of this kind of analysis, it is certainly not worth pursuing at the expense of obviously superior works in Demuth's oeuvre or of matters more important to his art.

A "revisionist" approach informs Haskell's essay in other ways. From 1910-14, Demuth wrote eleven short stories and a few brief plays. They are minor literary efforts of little interest—the products of a young mind in its formative stages. From them, however, Haskell proposes that Demuth viewed himself as much a writer as a painter: she devotes a full chapter to the subject. She even blames his writing for what she believes to be his "slow" maturity as a painter be-

tween 1910 and 1914. (Only in this day and age could four or five years in an artist's life be called a "slow" period of growth.) The whole idea is implausible. Demuth never wrote as extensively as, say, Hartley or Davis, and if one thing comes through in our sense of Demuth it is his acute awareness of himself as—first, foremost, and to the last—a painter.

The catalogue is filled with such distortions and misconceptions. Even when Demuth's art and the art history of his times are discussed, errors of fact and interpretation both major and minor abound, and many potentially important references are made only in passing. Demuth's early art, from about 1907-11, for example, is consistently referred to as "academic." It is not; it is conventional for its time but always strong and made with feeling, which is the antithesis of academic. The Forum show of 1916 was not, as Haskell claims, primarily about Cubism but rather showed the ascendancy of pure color. She refers to the effect of German Expressionism on Demuth, but never discusses just which artists he might have seen. She mentions Chinese painting but again leaves the matter unexplored, which is unfortunate, since Demuth clearly felt an affinity with the aesthetic conventions of Oriental art. Precisionism is briefly mentioned but the complicated issues surrounding its origins and development are never raised. In addition, Haskell never addresses the possible sources for Demuth's sublime color, although his stay in Paris from 1912-14, when color abstraction was founded, must have had as strong an effect on him as the 1916 Forum show surely did. Haskell's bibliography, like the show, seems complete at first—but it isn't. Betsy Fahlman's 1983 catalogue from the Philadelphia show—the most important Demuth study in recent years—is missing.

The most lamentable omission in the entire catalogue is a careful study of the water-

colors and a discussion of the questions they raise. In 1959, Farnham established nine categories of watercolors—do they still hold? Of what does this glorious body of a thousand works actually consist? Where does Demuth fit in the history of watercolor painting, in the lineage of Cézanne, Homer, Sargent, Nolde, Marin, and Prendergast? How does the surge of modernist watercolor painting relate to the American Watercolor Movement? As it happens, that movement was the subject of a small but illuminating show at the Brooklyn Museum last year. There we could see—in the work of famous artists and of the lesser known John Williams Hill (1812-1879) and H. Lynde (active 1859-1896)—just how strong the watercolor and flower tradition was in this country at one time. (There was also the New York Water Color Club, active around 1910.) This fact of a powerful tradition—unacknowledged by Haskell—brings other questions to mind. Why, around 1918-19, did O'Keeffe, Stella, Sheeler, and Schamberg—as well as Demuth—undertake flower watercolors? Just why has so much of our best art been in watercolor? And what is Demuth's special contribution to the tradition? Just how could he coax from this unforgiving medium such masterful results?

To understand such issues is to understand just how extraordinary Demuth's achievement was. But we learned little or nothing of any of these matters in the Whitney show and catalogue. Indeed, we learned little of real substance about Charles Demuth that was new. The catalogue was dedicated to Lloyd Goodrich and John I. H. Baur, who both died last year. But it does no service to the standards set by these two great men who did so much to establish American art as a field worthy of study. The Demuth retrospective was an opportunity lost, once more, at the Whitney. We are left asking: When will this all end? What will it take to stop this trivialization of art?

“A runaway dog like me”: Stephen Crane in his letters

by James W. Tuttleton

“It has been a theory of mine ever since I began to write, which was eight years ago, when I was sixteen, that the most artistic and the most enduring literature was that which reflected life accurately.” So remarked the young Stephen Crane (1871-1900)—author of *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) and *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895)—to the editor of *Demorest’s Family Magazine* in the spring of 1896. To regard the faith implied in his observation is to measure how far writers have since departed from the representational function of art, from the view of art as a reflection of reality. As the novelist Ronald Sukenick recently put it, for the contemporary writer “reality doesn’t exist, time doesn’t exist, personality doesn’t exist. God was the omniscient author, but he died; now no one knows the plot.” He and many other postmodern writers would have us believe that life can no longer be reflected accurately. Young Crane, however, placed his faith in representation; he belonged to the old school of Aristotelian mimesis. He remarked that he had tried “to observe closely, and to set down what I have seen in the simplest and most concise way. I have been careful not to let any theories or pet ideas of my own be seen in my writing. Preaching is fatal to art in literature. I try to give to readers a slice out of life; and if there is any moral or lesson in it I do not point it out. I let the reader find it for himself.”

A slice of life Crane certainly gave his readers—especially in his portraits of the

Bowery underworld at the turn of the century. But the moral significance of his work has been a problem for interpretation since he burst onto the literary scene in 1895. For Crane was wonderfully self-effacing in his fiction and had little of that reflexive self-consciousness that has lately, and almost fatally, disfigured the fictional art. It was the particulars of the visual field, precisely rendered in fiction, that counted for him, not a factitious relation to them. And if readers were dismayed at the seamy details of his representation, if they disliked the irony that undercut his characters’ gestures of heroism, he could take the criticism. “I understand that a man is born into the world with his own pair of eyes,” he once remarked. “To keep close to my honesty is my supreme ambition.” With his particular pair of eyes and fierce honesty, Crane was acclaimed at the *fin de siècle* as a boy-wonder in art, a juvenile genius with the pen, our own native Chatterton, perhaps our own Rimbaud. These sentimental estimates gained even greater currency in later years, for Crane’s death from tuberculosis in 1900, at the tender age of twenty-nine, ended the ordeal of a difficult career. Amy Lowell summed up the popular myth: Crane was “a boy spiritually killed by neglect.”

The truth is, however, that Crane was anything but neglected by his contemporaries; indeed, he attracted more attention than he could handle. Although his career as a published writer spanned just seven years,

he achieved almost instant literary fame. Aside from *The Red Badge and Maggie*, he was well known for *George's Mother* (1896), *The Little Regiment and Other Episodes of the American Civil War* (1896), *The Third Violet* (1897), *The Open Boat and Other Tales of Adventure* (1899), *Active Service* (1899), *The Monster and Other Stories* (1899), *Whilomville Stories* (1900), and *Wounds in the Rain: War Stories* (1900). To this list we must add his remarkable collections of verse, *The Black Riders and Other Lines* (1895), *A Souvenir and a Medley: Seven Poems and a Sketch* (1896), and *War Is Kind* (1899). So celebrated a public figure was Stephen Crane in life, and so poignant was he in his untimely death, that nearly every scrap that he wrote was subsequently collected, edited, and printed.

All these works played a role in creating the image of Stephen Crane as the mythic marvelous boy. But no one romanticized him as flamboyantly as his first biographer, the novelist Thomas Beer, whose *Stephen Crane* appeared in 1923. Wilson Follett, who knew Beer and who prepared a twelve-volume edition of Crane's works between 1925 and 1927, was convinced that "many of the letters and other documents" on which Beer based his life "may never have existed" and that parts of Beer's biography of Crane were "fictional." Recent work confirms this suspicion. Beer's highly impressionistic biography, as much invented as factual, concocted scenes, characters, and comments by Crane that later students have simply been unable to verify. Nevertheless, Beer's spurious work shaped the dominant image of Crane and has contaminated nearly every subsequent biography and edition of his letters. The poet John Berryman, for example, produced an eccentric Freudian biography of Crane in 1950. Heavily dependent on Beer, it made psychoanalytic hay out of Beer's invented letters and failed to verify "facts" already under suspicion. The scholar R. W. Stallman tried to clean up the situation by editing (with Lillian Gilkes) the letters and composing a massive new biography of Crane in 1968. But he too relied overmuch on Beer's mysteriously lost letters

and even included "quotations" from them in his own edition of the letters. In consequence, a reliable biography of Crane's life remains to be written.

It is an event of some importance, then, to have in hand a new edition of his letters, *The Correspondence of Stephen Crane*, edited in two volumes by Stanley Wertheim and Paul Sorrentino.¹ Fully aware of the sentimental view of Crane that has come down to us and of the errors that persist in Crane studies, they have made in this edition an attempt to set the record straight. Their editorial labor involves the correction of the text and dating of previously published letters, as well as relegating to an appendix all quotations from letters, cited in Beer's life, for which independent documentation does not exist. What we have here are some 780 letters, nearly 400 not included in the Stallman-Gilkes edition of the correspondence, among them 170 by Crane, more than 20 by his common-law wife Cora, and a number of letters by others as well. Crane's inscriptions, in the flyleaf of books he gave away, are also included. By printing so many new letters by Cora and others, the editors hope to present an "*ur*-biography" that will separate fact from fiction and thus lay the groundwork for a new definitive life.

What image of Stephen Crane emerges from this new edition of the letters? In my view, the editors are quite right to remark that from these letters "a demythologized Crane emerges. He was not, as sentimentalists would have it, the ghost of Chatterton." Nor was he, in Amy Lowell's formulation, a spiritually neglected American Keats. He was, instead, a journalist-writer, a newsman and novelist, whose personal circumstances permitted only occasional aesthetic triumphs.

Stephen Crane was born on November 1, 1871, in Newark, New Jersey, the fourteenth and last child of Jonathan Townley

1 *The Correspondence of Stephen Crane*, in two volumes, edited by Stanley Wertheim and Paul Sorrentino; Columbia University Press, 320 pages (Volume I) and 352 pages (Volume II), \$65 the set.

Crane, a distinguished Methodist clergyman, and Mary Helen Peck Crane, the daughter of a clergyman and the niece of the reverend Bishop Jesse T. Peck. After the death of Crane's father in 1880, the mother and children moved to Asbury Park, a resort town on the Atlantic, where young Stephen grew up. At sixteen he was sent to the Claverack College and Hudson River Institute, a military high school—"the happiest period of my life," Crane later said, "although I was not then aware of it." In 1890 he spent a term at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, but dropped out and transferred to Syracuse University for a term.

Academic studies, however, were not his forte. More interesting was his job as a stringer for *The New York Tribune*, which took him into the Putnam County police court, where he interviewed prostitutes and criminals. He followed up these investigations in the Bowery, where he became well known to the local pimps, thieves, and hookers. Meanwhile, he wrote stories about camping in upstate New York and life at the Jersey shore, and sketches of the urban underworld—all written, he would later say, in "my clever Rudyard-Kipling style."

The turning point in Crane's life as a writer occurred when he was covering a lecture on American literature by Hamlin Garland for the *Tribune* in 1891. In conversations with this older writer, the youth was initiated into Garland's theory of "veritism" in fiction and heard for the first time about William Dean Howells's call for realism in the literary art. Their contempt for Genteel Era sentimentalism, their praise for realistic art, and their desire for a precise representation of observed American reality—these transformed Garland and Howells into what Crane called his new "literary fathers." He told Lily Brandon Munroe, an older married woman with whom he was having an affair in 1893, that he had

renounced the clever school in literature. It seemed to me that there must be something more in life than to sit and cudgel one's brains for clever and witty expedients. So I developed

all alone a little creed of art which I thought was a good one. Later I discovered that my creed was identical with the one of Howells and Garland and in this way I became involved in the beautiful war between those who say that art is man's substitute for nature and [that] we are the most successful in art when we approach the nearest to nature and truth, and those who say—well, I don't know what they say. They don't, they can't say much but they fight villianously [*sic*] and keep Garland and I out of the big magazines. Howells, of course, is too powerful for them.

Out of his Bowery experience, reshaped by the canons of the new realism, came Crane's first novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893). Brief, blunt, and ironic, *Maggie* narrated the seduction of an innocent young girl, her rejection and eviction by the tenement-dwelling family, and her descent into prostitution, culminating in suicide. The material itself was raw stuff for Genteel Era America, despite the contemporaneous wave of sociological reportage like Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890). But particularly objectionable was Crane's non-judgmental presentation of the heroine; this was beyond the pale—too much like the filthy Zola in *Nana*. No respectable publisher would touch it, and Crane was obliged to have *Maggie* privately printed, at his own expense, under the pseudonym "Johnston Smith"—a commonplace name deliberately chosen to keep his pious family in the dark and to prevent the authorities from tracking him down and prosecuting him for obscenity.

It would be pleasant to report that the correspondence of Stephen Crane during this period throws a vivid light on his relation to the theme, form, and style of *Maggie*. But we can gain from these letters little new insight into the workings of his imagination. Unfortunately, Crane was neither a distinguished correspondent nor a reflective writer. His letters do not constitute an epistolary art, however indispensable they may be to an understanding of his life. His flyleaf com-

ment on *Maggie*, repeated in several book-gift inscriptions, does disclose, however, his acute awareness of the moral tone of the time, his attitude toward his forbidden subject, and the impact on his thinking of naturalistic theories of environmental determinism:

It is inevitable that you will be greatly shocked by this book but continue, please, with all possible courage, to the end. For, it tries to show that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless. If one proves that theory, one makes room in Heaven for all sorts of souls, notably an occasional street girl, who are not confidently expected to be there by many excellent people. It is probable that the reader of this small thing may consider the author to be a bad man, but obviously, that is a matter of small consequence to The Author.

Unfortunately, since the book had no publicity, distribution, or significant sales, it had zero effect on Crane's fortunes as a writer. Howells, whom he had come to know by 1893, was expected to champion the book, but even he was dismayed by it.

Crane's fortunes dramatically improved in 1895 when his second novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*, was syndicated in several newspapers and published by D. Appleton. The story of a raw recruit's psychological terror in his first exposure to combat, Crane's tale explored the anatomy of cowardice, creating a protagonist whom Joseph Conrad called "the symbol of all untried men." Vivid in its impressionistic vignettes, the book was widely acclaimed, in both England and America, as a superb treatment of the Civil War, perhaps the best war novel of all time. Reviewers compared Crane with Tolstoy and Zola, often to Crane's advantage. The book was a best-seller and went through fourteen printings in the first year; the twenty-four-year-old author was a national celebrity. His success made possible a re-issue of *Maggie* (in an expurgated form) and brought him feature-writing assignments in the West and Mexico, a commission to report on the Cuban insurrection of 1896,

an assignment in the Greco-Turkish War of 1897, and another to cover the Spanish-American War of 1898. All of these journalistic adventures led to an immense amount of reportage, most of which, it must be said, is uninspired hackwork. Still, out of Crane's far wandering came a handful of stories by which he will always be remembered—particularly "The Open Boat," "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," and "The Blue Hotel."

While Crane's great productivity is striking, his career as a serious literary artist virtually ended with *The Red Badge of Courage*. The last five years of his life reflect a dismaying decline into pathetic and ineffective pot-boiling, with only an occasional short-story success. In my view, this slide was largely the consequence of his brilliant talent for self-destruction—particularly in the management of his personal life and his private affairs. As the letters suggest, Crane reacted to the piety of his Methodist upbringing as many children of clergymen will do—by cultivating the forbidden. Alienated from the moral world represented by his family and religion, which he was ready to write off as mere hypocrisy, Crane descended into the Bowery underworld of thieves and prostitutes. Ostensibly there to report on conditions, he fell afoul of the New York City police in 1895 by publicly defending a known prostitute, Dora Clark, against false arrest. In quixotically undertaking to defend this streetwalker, who had been picked up in his company for public solicitation, the chivalric Crane exposed himself to slander and vilification—the police insinuating that he was an alcoholic, a drug addict, and worse. Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt had liked *The Red Badge of Courage* but thenceforth shunned the young novelist-reporter. And the outraged New York City police lay in wait and harassed him wherever he went.

Crane had, quite frankly, a genius for getting involved with impossible women. After the collapse of his affair with Mrs. Munroe, to whom he gave the manuscript of *Maggie*

(her furious husband burned it), and after the failed seduction of Nellie Crouse (a particularly conventional girl from Akron), Crane became involved in a sticky affair with Amy Leslie, a brilliant but unstable theater critic for the *Chicago Daily News*, from whom he had borrowed the considerable sum of eight hundred dollars. She appears to have told him that she was pregnant with his child. Thus, with the New York City police hounding him and with Amy Leslie apparently demanding money or marriage, the Cuban insurrection that November offered Crane the perfect way out of his troubles: he ran. In moments of crisis, in fact, flight was his characteristic gesture. As he remarked to his Appleton publisher Ripley Hitchcock in March of 1896: "I cannot help vanishing and disappearing and dissolving. It is my foremost trait."

In Jacksonville, Florida, where Crane awaited a boat for Cuba that fall in 1896, he expressed his undying love to Amy Leslie, while enjoining his literary executor Willis Brooks Hawkins "to help Amy in what is now really a great trouble." Most students of Crane's life have inferred from this remark that he got her into trouble, but one witness reports that Amy Leslie had "framed Crane, saying she was pregnant, in an effort to get Crane to marry her." The truth of the matter we shall perhaps never know. But the Jacksonville letters of December 1896 show Crane simultaneously reassuring Amy Leslie while scoring a new romantic conquest with one Cora Taylor. It appears to have been easy enough for the handsome and famous author of *Maggie* and *The Red Badge*, but it had long-range and, in my view, disastrous implications.

Cora Taylor, who had come from a respectable Boston family (the Howarths), was the veteran madam of one of the swankiest whorehouses in Jacksonville—a "pleasure resort" called the Hotel de Dream. At the time Cora met Crane she had gone through two husbands but was still married to Captain Donald William Stewart, the younger son of an English baronet. No one knows where she met Stewart, or how, after

her marriage broke up, she got from London to Florida. Why she took the name Taylor is also a question. But by 1896 she had accumulated quite a little property and ran a Class-A establishment—so said the clerk at the St. James Hotel, who kept "a list of the better houses of ill fame for the intelligent guidance of guests of the hotel." Cora, it would appear, was not without erotic competition, for Crane knew other madams along "the line" (as the red-light district in Jacksonville was called) and in fact inscribed a copy of *Maggie* to Lyda de Camp, one of the more notorious Jacksonville whoremistresses, in February of 1897. But, according to habitués of the district, Cora "had class" and so she captured the boy.

Lillian Gilkes, Cora Taylor's biographer, was of the opinion that Cora belonged "in the tradition of those European women—authors and courtesans—who, with their intellectual curiosity, wit, and immense personal charm, achieved renown in the salons over which they more or less unconventionally presided: the Aphra Behns, Ouidas, George Sands, de Staëls, and Récamiers." This, it seems to me, is putting the best face on matters. Six years older than Crane, remarkably big-bosomed and stout of thigh, Cora was more nearly a maternal figure to the errant writer than a grand intellectual or literary inspiration. But in Crane she had a brilliant catch, and she played her cards nearly to perfection. (Perhaps getting wind of this new liaison, Amy Leslie meanwhile sued Crane for the recovery of her loan, causing a public ruckus that did nothing for his reputation in New York.)

Cora Taylor nearly lost her handsome young novelist on the morning of January 2, 1897. En route to Cuba to report on the insurrection, his filibustering steamer the *Commodore*—carrying men and munitions to the Cuban rebels—mysteriously exploded and went down. Struggling with heavy seas in a small dinghy for thirty hours, the captain, Crane, and two others eventually washed up on the Daytona beach. As Wertheim and Sorrentino rightly note, "For Crane, this struggle for survival with the

elements and its irrational denouement [the oiler Higgins, the best swimmer in the group, was drowned in the surf] confirmed his view of the essential conditions of life itself and was fictionalized, with very little alteration of the actual circumstances, in his finest story, 'The Open Boat.'

Back in Jacksonville, Crane was provided by Cora with such priceless consolations that, when he was commissioned to cover the Greco-Turkish war that spring, he wangled for her a commission as the first female war correspondent, and they sailed for Greece. Richard Harding Davis, a journalist who also covered this war, mentioned Cora in a letter from Athens as "a Lady Stuart [*sic*] who has run away from her husband to follow Crane." He described her as "a commonplace dull woman old enough to have been his mother and with dyed yellow hair." Curiously, Crane's first dispatches about this little "bathtub war" were highly lyrical and beat the military drum. But hardly had the war's sobering reality begun to impress him when it ended abruptly, in a month's time, with the rout of the Greeks. After some local sightseeing (they visited a harem in Constantine), Crane and Cora decided to settle in England. After all, Stephen could not take the madam of a Jacksonville whorehouse back to his Methodist family in America. Where could they live? In England, Crane's fiction was immensely popular; and there, they thought, the unconventionality of their liaison would be more acceptable. Nevertheless, in England, they represented themselves as "Mr. and Mrs. Crane."

Stephen Crane's life with Cora in England, it must be said, was the stuff of sheer bohemian excess. Settling at Ravensbrook, Oxted, Surrey, in June of 1897, they fell in with the writers Harold Frederic, Ford Madox Hueffer (later Ford), and H. G. Wells, all of whom were living with women not their wives. Joseph and Jessie Conrad also lived nearby, and the then-struggling Polish author became a close friend. (To Conrad, Crane confided that his firsthand experience of the war in Greece proved to

him that *The Red Badge* was "all right.") Even Henry James, living nearby in Rye, was drawn into the bizarre social life—which often resembled a circus—of the young "Mr. and Mrs. Crane." So many people descended on them from London—the idle, the curious, people with a cause, out-and-out sponges—that Crane nearly went bankrupt in entertaining them and could manage to get very little work done. According to Ford Madox Hueffer, the Cranes attracted "the most discreditable bums any city can ever have seen." Cora remarked to a friend in December 1897 that "Stephen is fat, for him, and works hard. He is so content and good quite the old married man" (*sic*). But she obviously missed the signs of his growing discontent. When the Spanish-American War broke out in 1898, Crane seized the opportunity to pull another disappearing act. He abandoned Cora for the attractions of the bully little war.

Crane's adventures in Cuba provoked another of the great public scandals of his life: literally, he dropped from sight. Possibly he had grown tired of Cora or become embarrassed by the alliance he had contracted with her. Perhaps he was tired of domestic life and—in the age of Rough Rider heroes—wanted more adventure than even an unconventional arrangement with Cora would permit. Perhaps he simply wanted the freedom to write. In any case, he became a runaway. He stopped writing to Cora and disappeared in Havana. Not knowing where he was and unable to communicate with him, Cora became frantic. The bills piled up, solicitors threatened, tradesmen sued, and the domestic situation at Ravensbrook began to collapse. To make ends meet, Cora tried to sell Crane's juvenilia to publishers and promised them manuscripts Crane had not even written. She wrote hysterical letters and fired off cables, desperately trying to find her "husband." All of the war correspondents in Cuba were mobilized for the search. To John Hay, the United States Ambassador in London, Cora addressed a cable for help, noting that Crane "was watched, I understand, by the spanish police [*sic*]. He was

stopping quietly at Hotel Pasaje—and disappeared about Sep 8th. I am almost distracted with grief and anxiety . . .” Likewise she cabled Crane’s family in America, who were stunned by the bombshell news that Stephen now had a wife. Those who knew let it be known in America that Madam Cora, however, was no wife. Tongues wagged on both sides of the Atlantic: Crane had done it again. Eventually, the Hearst press tracked him down and reported that Crane was “hiding” in a Havana boardinghouse, holed up, writing. Oblivious to what had been going on, Crane was humiliated by the public fuss. “For a mild and melancholy kid,” said James Gibbons Huneker, “he certainly had fallen completely into the garbage can of gossip.”

How could he escape this gossip? In the age of the Rough Riders, any young man might think that heroic conduct under fire offered a bully means of salvaging one’s reputation. But there is a curious paradox in Crane’s behavior that deserves a brief digression. *The Red Badge of Courage* is generally interpreted as Wertheim and Sorrentino describe it: it “exposed the futility of war and expressed an extremely cynical attitude toward heroism.” Crane’s protagonist in the novel, young Henry Fleming, is ironized unmercifully for his adolescent illusions about manliness in battle; and Crane’s tale, “A Mystery of Heroism,” shows heroic conduct to be the result of everything but chivalric will and intention. After the publication of the novel, though, Crane seemed oddly sympathetic to the military, deeply attracted to warfare, and inclined to behave (under fire) in ways that are utterly inconsistent with the ironic treatment of heroic behavior that we find in *The Red Badge of Courage*. To explain this paradox, we would do well to remember that he was sent to military school because, as his sister-in-law, Mrs. George Crane, put it, “he loved to play at soldiers from his earliest childhood.” “Most of his playthings were in the form of toy soldiers, guns and the like,” she remarked, and “his fondness for everything

military induced his mother to send him to the Claverack Military Academy.” During the Greco-Turkish War, he wrote his brother William from Athens that he hoped

to get a position on the staff of the Crown Prince. Wont [*sic*] that be great? I am so happy over it I can hardly breathe. I shall try—I shall try like blazes to get a decoration out of the thing but that depends on good fortune and is between you and I and God.

He failed, of course, to get that commission. But when the war broke out with Spain, Crane tried to enlist in the U. S. Navy. Physically unfit, he nevertheless covered the landings at Guantánamo as a journalist and distinguished himself for bravery far beyond that expected of a noncombatant. He repeatedly exposed himself to the withering gunfire of the Spanish and was later praised by many officers for his coolness under fire. Heroism he appeared to want for himself, however much his fiction had undercut it.

Some of the other journalists thought he had a death wish and was trying to get himself killed. Was he struggling with guilt? Did this minister’s son find himself unable to face a return to Cora? Or had his incipient tuberculosis become manifest and spurred him to last-minute heroics? The answer to these questions is difficult—in part because we do not have Crane’s letters to Cora, which are mysteriously missing. (The editors remark that they were denied access to some collections, one of which may contain Crane’s letters to her.) In any case, Crane’s feelings about returning to Cora can be only inferred from his behavior and from a certain reading between the lines. His poem “Intrigue,” which appears to refer to her, reads “Thou art my love, / And thou art the ashes of other men’s love, / And I bury my face in these ashes, / And I love them— / Woe is me.” Was he overwhelmed with jealousy about her past—or morbidly in love with it? Was the possessive Cora suffocating to the youth? It is hard to tell. For whatever reason, Crane lingered in North America after the war.

During the nine months of his separation from her, he tried (unsuccessfully) to revive his affair with Lily Brandon Munroe. Meanwhile, there is no clear answer to the question Conrad posed to the frantic Cora: "What kind of trouble is Stephen in? You make me very uneasy. Are you *sure* you can bring him back?"

Eventually he did come back to her, with explanations we can only imagine. But he took up life with her at a new establishment, Brede Place. This huge manorial hall, farther from London, lured even more unwelcome visitors (lice, Crane called them). Cora was visibly relieved to have him back, but the maintenance of this new household, with its caretaker, horses and dogs, and the steady stream of visitors, cost "Baron Brede," as Crane was called, a pretty penny. Much of the expense was owing, it would seem, to Cora's extravagance and love of luxury. "I have lived five years in one all my life," Cora once noted in her diary; "I have never economized in sensation, emotion. I am a spend-thrift in every way." Crane, on the financial side, was little better. "In one way Steve and I are the same person," Cora told one of his friends. "We have no sense about money at all."

To pay for the cases of wine and champagne, the game pies, the sides of beef and cartloads of vegetables for this establishment, Crane had to write, write, write. And the burden of his correspondence in the last two years of his life is invariably money. To Paul Revere Reynolds, his American agent, and James B. Pinker, his English agent, and to various newspaper editors and publishers, the plea is always the same—send as much as possible, immediately. The appeals became increasingly desperate and ugly. He canned Reynolds because the checks were not frequent enough, and he likewise threatened to fire the estimable Pinker (the agent of James, Conrad, and other distinguished writers). Meanwhile, Crane ground out the copy—journalistic essays, mediocre short stories, abortive novel manuscripts—almost all of dubious quality. Throughout this period Cora also bombarded his agents—

sending promises of more "stuff" to come, demands for immediate payment, and appeals for advances on yet unwritten manuscripts, and expressing fears of threatened lawsuits. According to Karl Harriman, Crane once "remained in his room for three days, sleepless and complaining when Cora tiptoed in with food on a tray that even the slight sound, breaking his concentration, was like a brick hurled through a window. In that time he poked four stories under the door, and Cora ran them off on the typewriter for Pinker." At this point in Crane's life, as Wertheim and Sorrentino rightly note, only the word count, not the quality, seemed to matter to them.

Such slapdash work was not easy to sell, and Crane repeatedly complained of editors' indifference and the critics' habit of comparing his new stuff with what he called "the accursed 'Red Badge.'" Couldn't they see that "the high dramatic key of *The Red Badge* cannot be sustained"? Invariably they couldn't: many of his stories were rejected, and published works—like *The Third Violet* and *Active Service*—produced critical dismay. Crane became so imperious about money that Pinker was obliged to write Crane on October 24, 1899: "I confess that you are becoming most alarming. You telegraphed on Friday for £20; Mrs. Crane, on Monday, makes it £50; today comes your letter making it £150, and I very much fear that your agent must be a millionaire if he is to satisfy your necessities a week hence, at this rate . . . There is a risk of spoiling the market if we have to dump too many stories on it at once."

A disappointment of his collected correspondence, so concerned as it is with money, is that Crane rarely reflects on what his writing means to him; nor does he have much to say about the distinguished English writers with whom he was so frequently in contact. The best literary material is never very felicitous in expression. But a few instances may be revealing. On November 11, 1897, Crane told Conrad that *The Nigger of the Narcissus* was

simply great. The simple treatment of the death of Waite [James Wait] is too good, too terrible. I wanted to forget it at once. It caught me very hard. I felt ill over that red thread lining from the corner of the man's mouth to his chin. It was frightful with the weight of a real and present death. By such small means does the real writer suddenly flash out in the sky above those who are always doing rather well.

Conrad reciprocated by praising Crane's "A Man and Some Others" and remarking that he was horribly envious of him. "Confound you—you fill the blamed landscape—you—by all the devils—fill the seascape." "The Open Boat" he called "immensely interesting. I don't use the word in its common sense. It is fundamentally interesting to me. Your temperament makes old things new and new things amazing. I want to swear at you, to bless you—perhaps to shoot you—but I prefer to be your friend."

In response to some direct questions from Thomas Hutchinson, Crane observed that

I am not carnivorous about living writers. I have not read any of the books that you ask me to criticize except that of Mr. Howells, and it has disappointed me. My tastes? I do not know of any living author whose works I have wholly read. I like what I know of Anatole France, Henry James, George Moore and several others. I deeply admire some short stories by Mr. Bierce, Mr. Kipling and Mr. White. Mr. Hardy, since you especially inquire about his work, impresses me as a gigantic writer who "overtreats" his subjects.

Crane told his friend Henry Sanford Bennett that he was wrong about Ford Madox Hueffer: "I admit he is patronizing. He patronized his family. He patronizes Conrad. He will end up by patronizing God who will have to get used to it and they will be friends." And Crane complained of "Tea at James's. My God how does he stand these bores who pester him. Mrs. Humphrey Ward was there. What an old cow! She has no more mind than a president." That James

had even invited the Cranes to tea was a testament to his admiration of the boy, and an act of remarkable tolerance—for ugly rumors had spread in Surrey that Cora was not Crane's wife, and James had only limited tolerance of this brazen disregard for social conventions.

In respect to Oscar Wilde, whose recent homosexual entanglements had landed him in jail, Crane was rather blunt. "About Wilde and his troubles," Crane observed,

a mere stranger and runaway dog like me can't be supposed to care. I met him once. We stood and looked at each other and he bleated like a sheep. With those bad manners that are so awfully much mine I laughed in his face. He tried to borrow money from Dick Davis when he was being tried after insulting Davis all across London. Something pretty poor in him. And I owe my brothers too much money to bother about helping with subscriptions for a mildewed chump like Wilde. Blood, etc. If Harris and the rest of Wilde's friends really want to help him they ought to send him express to Weir Mitchell [a physician-novelist specializing in the treatment of literary neurasthenics] or some specialist in his kind of malady. Perhaps it is because I lived on borrowed money and ate in lunch-wagons when I was trying to be someone that these magnified sinners in good duds bore me so. That isn't what Conrad would call a sentiment of generosity but it is mine. If Conrad has any French blood in him I don't know of it. He is, I think, a pure Polish gent.

But such remarks fail of any great literary insight, are essentially gossip, minor table talk at best.

The beginning of the end for Crane occurred in the winter season of 1899 when he and Cora decided to throw a huge three-day Christmas party. This bizarre extravaganza required the re-decoration of the whole manor hall and the renovation of the bedrooms for some fifty-odd invited house-guests. The festivities were highlighted with the performance of a silly play dealing with

the legend of the Brede Hall ghost, Sir Goddard Oxenbridge. While Crane wrote most of "The Ghost," he solicited copy (of any kind) from Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Wells, George Gissing, and other writer friends—so as to feature them as authors on the printed program. The neighbors thought the party a Babylonian orgy; H. G. Wells called it a lark. Drinking and dancing and games went on apace. But the gaiety ended on December 29, after the grand ball, when Crane collapsed with a lung hemorrhage and his doom was sealed.

Desperate to save him, Cora got the best medical attention she could. But Crane's health deteriorated further and his doctor recommended his removal to the Black Forest for the Nordrach treatment, a regimen for tuberculosis that included rest, some over-eating, and pure air. Broke and in debt to Pinker, who had advanced money on yet unpublished stories, Cora appealed desperately to family and friends for financial assistance, but little was forthcoming. Rather surprisingly, the tenderest expression of affection for Crane came from Henry James, who told Cora:

It is a shock to me that Crane is less well—I was full of hope, & had been, in that hope, assuming that a good effect had come to him from his move: cheerful theories much disconcerted! I think of him with more sympathy & sorrow than I can say . . . I won't pretend to utter hopes about Crane which may be vain—or seem to you now, & thereby only irritating or, at least, distressing: but I constantly think of him & as it were pray for him. I feel that I am not taking too much for granted in believing that you may be in the midst of worries on the money-score which will perhaps make the cheque for Fifty Pounds, that I enclose, a convenience to you. Please view it as such & dedicate it to whatever service it may best render my stricken young friend. It meagrely represents my tender benediction to him.

But the convalescence was to no avail. Stephen Crane died on June 5, 1900.

For those interested in the fate of Cora Crane, it may be remarked that she lost out to the Crane family in a contest over the right to Crane's literary estate and returned to Jacksonville, Florida. There, in a mysteriously short time, she opened up another whorehouse, "The Court," and in 1905 married Hammond P. McNeil, a young saloonkeeper of twenty-five (she was forty-one). Furiously jealous of her attentions to one Harry Parker (age nineteen), McNeil murdered Parker in cold blood but was acquitted because it was "a husband's crime of honor." He then sued Cora for divorce, claiming that he had been deceived as to her character and didn't know she kept a "disorderly house." Her name became a public joke and a byword. And of course these widely publicized events did Crane's posthumous reputation no good. When Cora Crane died in 1910, she was co-habiting with a businessman named Ernest Budd, said to be estranged from his wife. It was rumored in Jacksonville that their "adopted" child was really hers, fathered by Budd. But her biographer Lillian Gilkes was unable to verify this tale.

On learning of Crane's death, Henry James wrote: "What a brutal, needless extinction—what an unmitigated unredeemed catastrophe! I think of him with such a sense of possibilities and powers." Possibilities and powers Crane did indeed have, in abundance. And had his circumstances been more propitious, had his domestic arrangements been less financially ruinous, he might have realized those possibilities. As it is, we find it hard to disagree with the editors of his correspondence that "the constantly reiterated demand for money, money, money in Crane's letters to his publishers and literary agents and his final deterioration into hackwork suggest what his future might have been had he survived his twenty-ninth year." We are left then with *Maggie*, *The Red Badge*, a few distinguished stories, and a handful of striking poems. But these sufficiently testify to Crane's brilliant, if meteoric, literary talent.

Poems *by* W. S. Di Piero, Jeffrey Harrison,
Patricia Clark, Peter Davison, &
Walter Griffin

The hermit thrush

Daytime streamed behind the treeline.
Yellow to ghost-green to something bluer
burnt by fledged darkness. What charmed us
hurt us—the remote, glassy completeness
of song, deep inside the spruces,
poured a ring around the one
our small talk made. It came again,
a laddered trill, something we felt
in one another's nerves, a knowledge
of time in things. Behind the trees,
unheard, out of sight, ran the stream
that broke around your sunburnt ankle
and gashed V's in the water glare.
You lifted a foot, chopped your heel
into the current, a glum axfall *tunk*
in the torrent's loud oblivion.

Earlier (how long? we live
dreamed by hours? breathed by their passing?)
you grabbed my arm and pumped, pointing,
breath sucked in like long silence
soon to cry into freakish need:
the osprey that for days had pitched
above the river, stooped, cracked
the river's louder rush once,
twice, oaring up through the sky.
A copper something squirmed in its claws.
In our clearing, the hermit's flight
slit the wall of big spruces,
bluer now, night coming down,
needles stacked and cross-stitched black
on black, ripped, sealed tight again,
one place where something song had been.

—*W. S. Di Piero*

The harvest dance

(after Van Gogh's "Sheaves of Wheat")

I took my despair out to the fields
and stared hard at the sheaves of wheat
scintillant in the sun, so yellow
that flecks of the blue sky came down
to dance among the spiky ears.

Then I saw the sheaves were figures
in yellow robes tied with a sash—
that harvest gave the wheat a body,
fashioning a population
of deities from earth and sunlight.

As soon as I thought that, it happened:
the sheaves began to move slowly,
pacing with a shuffling step
and rocking to the rhythm of
a moaning chant of death and plenty.

I watched until they slowed and stopped,
returning to their former places,
and I continued walking
through the fields, happy, my mind
buzzing like a cicada.

—Jeffrey Harrison

Her red coat

I remember none of my mother's clothes
except, from years ago, a red coat.
Is that all that's left of those
we love—a memory, a lump in the throat

when we see a certain color, or a smell
wafts to us on the random air?
I stood in a closet, unable to tell
time or say my own name, my hair

brushed by the folds of her clothes.
Some object will separate itself
from last year's losses, I suppose,
and ten years in the future engulf

an ordinary day with ancient pain.
The birdfeeder we gathered around
at dusk, perhaps, when the nearly tame
gray squirrels scabbled to the ground

down a tree-trunk. Or, more likely,
it will be some object long forgotten,
its dumb, accusing presence near me
when I'm almost healed, or have been

happy during a winter afternoon.
Sometimes I long, terribly, to have no
memory. I'd wake in the soon-
to-be-day gray-blue light like so

many other days and not be pierced
by these fragments from the past.
No more of this—sitting immersed
in sorrow, and tasting dust.

—*Patricia Clark*

Poetry editor

I write you this because, to your surprise
perhaps, I have grazed through your poems
as a chance visitor to your room might, noting
a pair of green slippers dropped beside the bed
and a half-finished letter on the desk—
which I have read. From such clues I can guess
that you allowed yourself to be interrupted,
and why you walked outside, and where. I know
something about your habits, how you touch
the words you choose, which edges you have crimped,
those which you've not been able to unbalance.
I know more than you want me to, perhaps,
about what you are obsessed by, whether you
have ravished your desire or been flung back;
I've read the sayings that you call your own,
the ways you take to try to make them ours.

You might not think that you were spied upon,
but take my word, at least, that I was here
when you were out. And found you in, at home.

—*Peter Davison*

Aunt Ida and Lord Byron

She read his lines with reverence,
one could almost hear his
lame foot dragging across the floor.
How unfamiliar Texas must have been
behind the dust piled windows:
The spectre dissolved in yellow light
as she slowly closed the book
and her breath seemed caught
in the kindling fire, while I,
pulling my toes through my socks
longed for summer and the sharp
blades of grass that cut
red ribbons on my knees.

— *Walter Griffin*

Dance

Tinkerer, Taylor

by Eva Resnikova

To have attended the Paul Taylor Dance Company's month-long spring season at City Center night after night—six different programs, each comprising three ballets—was to be overwhelmed by the scope of one man's creative imagination. But if Taylor's dances sometimes suggest the machinations of a wild and crazy guy, his almost folksy manner, as glimpsed on a recent PBS "Dance in America" broadcast, belies it. His commentary, laconic and deceptively casual, provided some tantalizing insights into the working methods and aesthetics of this remarkable artist.

Taking us on a tour of the property that surrounds his country home on Long Island's North Fork, he pointed out some of the construction projects he's set himself, using driftwood and other objects that have washed up on the shore: a stairway leading down from his house to the beach; a gazebo; a shack he calls "the little house." Of the last he noted, "In making it, it was a little like making a dance—that is, I decided a few rules about it." For instance, he wouldn't spend any money—even the nails were pried from used lumber—and he wouldn't measure anything.

Returning inside, he showed us his collection of rocks and shells, and a flock of local butterflies he had caught that now lay pinned under a glass table top. He spoke of his affinity for nature and of the "consolation" he derived from the symbiotic relationship between a certain type of beetle and

the mimosa tree it fed off each spring. He gave a partial inventory of the detritus that the tides had deposited on his beach over the years: an old rowboat, whose variegated layers of peeling paint created patterns that were to him as "pretty" as any consciously made art object, and a piece of which he had hung on his wall; a wooden chest, which he now used to store linens in; a dead dog.

He then added, "I don't have any real philosophies to tell you about my dances, or my making little houses or gazebos or catching butterflies and putting them on a table. It's just what I enjoy doing." But even if he shies from dignifying his beliefs with such a grandiose term as "philosophies," just linking the making of dances with the construction of little houses and gazebos and butterfly tables tells us something important about Taylor's philosophy, most notably his view of himself as an "assembler"—his term—of found materials, whether these be discarded lumber, butterflies, or human gestures.

In his recent autobiography, *Private Domain*, Taylor traced his development as an artist and in the process verbalized some of his beliefs about choreography. By the time he recognized his vocation he was in college—too old to begin ballet training, for which he was in any case temperamentally unsuited. (He includes in his autobiography an open hate letter addressed to the "Classic Ballet," occasioned by an insipidly sweet production of his *Aureole* by the Royal

Danish Ballet—"Aureole as a danish," he described it.) In the Fifties and early Sixties he passed through the companies of Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham, rejecting the "psychology" of the former and the "mystique" of the latter. But, he adds, he enjoyed the "actual steps" of Graham's technique, and he graciously allows that though Cunningham and Cage's aleatoric methods were "incompatible to my own ways of thinking," they "served Merce and his audience in a valuable way."

What enchanted Taylor was "found" movement.

Everywhere the city's inhabitants are on the move—objects just waiting to be found . . . Lines of restless people at banks, theatres, and rest rooms. Wads crammed into elevators or spaced artistically on subway platforms or leaning against skyscrapers. They are standing, squatting, sitting everywhere like marvelous ants or bees, and their moves and stillnesses are ABCs that if given a proper format could define dance in a new way.

The opportunity to apply these observations presented itself in a concert he gave in October 1957 titled *7 New Dances*, a nightmare premonition of Sixties minimalism based on "a collection of natural postures." It opened with *Epic*, a ten-minute virtuoso solo in which an immaculately business-suited Taylor stood virtually immobile as a telephone operator announced the time at ten-second intervals. It emptied the hall and elicited a famous review in *Dance Observer* from Louis Horst, Martha Graham's mentor, consisting of four inches of blank space. Taylor's first reaction was "outrage." ("The review wasn't even very long," he complains in his autobiography.) But the experience ultimately proved constructive. He had defined some "roots" to work from, and the loss of his audience had taught him to "bear them in mind next time I try to communicate private dreams."

From the vantage point of thirty years, Taylor displays a remarkable consistency of vision: his attraction to natural human ges-

ture and to nature in all its beauty and ugliness and even cruelty; his fondness for "bugs"; his preference for steps over psychology and mysticism; his seeing himself as an assembler of found objects and natural gesture, and his realization of the need to impose order on them to create something that is useful, or merely beautiful. ("I didn't need a gazebo," he tells us. "Who needs a gazebo?")

Private Domain ends in 1975, with Taylor's retirement from performing, but the final note is a hopeful one, as he gathers his dancers in the studio and announces the start of rehearsals for a new ballet. It is to be called *Esplanade*, and it will become one of Taylor's most popular and enduring works. He chose it to open his company's season in April, which comprised eighteen works, all post-*Esplanade*, and included two premieres. One of the things this ambitious undertaking demonstrated was how Taylor creates in each of his works a totally new world, with its own look and its own impeccable logic. He defines this world through décor, lighting, costumes, music, gesture, and an intentionally restricted movement vocabulary. That Taylor is not afraid to restrict his vocabulary was apparent from the beginning of his career (vide *Epic*). While most fledgling choreographers are bursting with ideas they feel compelled to express, Taylor seemed instinctively to grasp the necessity of curbing this youthful enthusiasm, which is often merely a form of self-promotion. (It took the example of Stravinsky's *Apollo* to make the twenty-four-year-old Balanchine understand this: "It seemed to tell me that I could dare not to use everything, that I, too, could eliminate.")

To attempt to categorize an output as vast and various as Taylor's is an undertaking fraught with danger. Nonetheless, two main strains—or, more accurately, endpoints of a continuum—can be distinguished in his work. In one, the dancers present themselves simply as dancers; in the other, they portray characters, even if these are sometimes inscrutable. The first might be called lyrical; the second, dramatic.

To my tastes, Taylor's greatest gifts lie toward the dramatic end of this continuum. For one thing, in the more lyrical pieces he is less adventurous in his choice of music, tending to dip into the standard Romantic and Baroque repertoires: a Brahms String Quintet for *Equinox*; Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll* and a Clarinet Adagio, erroneously thought to be early Wagner and now attributed to one Heinrich Baermann, for *Roses*; assorted movements from Bach for his new *Brandenburgs*. Then, too, the effects Taylor aims at in these pieces are often more clearly expressed via the technical resources of the classical ballet, with its ability to make finer rhythmic distinctions. Taylor's characteristic vocabulary yields broader effects, partly because bare feet are simply not capable of the intricacies of pointes. And unison movement, often a significant factor in these dances, suffers because Taylor's steps are not tied as strictly to the musical counts, and because he encourages personal individuality in his dancers.

Taylor's lyrical instincts work best when he wanders furthest from the letter of the music, as he does in the last movement of *Esplanade*, which does not pretend to be a music visualization of the Allegro of Bach's D-minor Double Violin Concerto but rather equates the music's nonstop activity and high spirits with a barrage of alarmingly dangerous-looking falls, rolls, leaps into other dancers' arms, and slides that are as American as baseball. Less successful are Taylor's attempts at a more formal approach to this kind of music, especially when the score has become hackneyed through over-familiarity, as is the case with *Brandenburgs*.

Taylor blossoms when he populates his dances with characters, even when these personages provoke a degree of befuddlement. In last year's *Kith and Kin*, set to a Mozart serenade, the dramatis personae consist of a sober couple in dark-brown, vaguely Victorian dress who perform a stately minuet; four couples in beige, the girls in short-sleeved, knee-length dresses, the boys in pants and shirts, who dance a raucous polka

with a ländler-like push into the ground; and a contemporary-looking mystery woman in a plain white leotard top and skirt who wafts in and out of the action. Taking our cue from the title, the couple in brown must be the parents, the eight boys and girls the children, and the woman in white . . . La Sylphide. Except that we sense Taylor is really portraying his company, which would make the parents Taylor and his longtime ballet mistress, the children the dancers, and the woman in white . . . La Sylphide. We'll never know for sure, but these characters remain provocatively mysterious rather than merely illegible.

Even more inscrutable is *House of Cards* (1981), to Milhaud's *La Création du monde*, perhaps because the score, written in 1923 to a libretto by Blaise Cendrars, comes already laden with a program and a place in the history of avant-garde ballet. We recognize Adam and Eve, even though they do the Charleston. But who is the lady in the silver lamé Poiret gown and turban who, at the end, is held aloft with her legs parted while the other dancers tumble backwards through them, like a birth in reverse?

When in addition to creating characters Taylor lets loose his wicked sense of humor, he is inimitable. *Lost, Found and Lost* (1982) harks back twenty-five years to *7 New Dances*, as Taylor explains in a lengthy program note, and consists entirely of "found" movement. It opens with the ten dancers arrayed symmetrically about the stage, standing in casual postures. A man lying on the floor repeatedly attempts, without success, to pick himself up. A line of dancers forms up-stage right, and with that air of both resignation and annoyance familiar to New Yorkers with more important things to do, they wait their turn to exit. A girl adopts a particularly casual stance, one hand on slightly out-thrust hip. Suddenly she notices another girl in the exact same posture and recoils in horror. A man thrashes about on the floor. Four girls enter shaking a foot. Boys walk about with their hands held out in front of them like paws. A girl examines herself with supreme self-absorption, picking at

invisible lint, as two other dancers cavort around her. A group suddenly shoots out from the wings in unison travelling arabesques. A slumping man enters from the upstage left wing, crosses the stage, and exits into the upstage right wing. A girl scrutinizes the bottom of her shoe. A bunch of dancers perform seemingly spontaneous, natural gestures in perfect unison. Several boys jump up and down in place with their legs together and their arms folded on their chests. Three girls lie on their backs on the floor; two groups of boys lift two of the girls overhead, and the third girl bounces as if to levitate herself to complete the pattern.

The coup de théâtre that binds all this together is Taylor's startling choice of décor, costumes, and music. A harshly lit white cyclorama and floorcloth turns the stage into an early-Sixties Avedon-type photographer's studio. (Commenting on his rejection of outdoor locations and natural light around this time, Avedon explained that his signature studio format "isolates people from their environment . . . they become in a sense symbolic of themselves.") The dancers are costumed in unisex long-sleeved, high-necked black knit jumpsuits distinguished only by the slightly different arrangement of rhinestones that adorn each one. Headgear consists of a tight-fitting black cap with a black tulle veil. (Alex Katz is responsible for costumes and décor; Jennifer Tipton for the lighting.) The look is late-Fifties, early-Sixties high-fashion model—the Audrey Hepburn of *Funny Face* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. (*Funny Face* and *7 New Dances* both had their premieres in 1957.) The men pull it off effortlessly, without the slightest hint of effeminacy; in fact, they look downright elegant. The score—identified in the program as "wallpaper music"—begins with portentous-sounding chords (this to accompany the Beckettian image of the man attempting to right himself) and segues into a medley of Mantovani-style arrangements of Muzak standards like "Red Roses for a Blue Lady," "Ebb Tide," and "As Time Goes By." (It is to this last that the boys do their pogo jumps.)

The comic masterpiece of the season was Taylor's *Le Sacre du printemps* (*The Rehearsal*), as he calls it, performed, logically enough, to the rehearsal score that Stravinsky prepared for piano four-hands. Taylor's *Sacre* dates from 1980, well before the Joffrey's reconstruction of Nijinsky's "lost" original choreography. The year before Taylor did his *Sacre*, however, the Joffrey had staged the only Nijinsky choreography that has remained in continuous performance, *L'Après-midi d'un faune*. It is the flattened, angular Faun stance that provides both the basis for Taylor's gesture and the historical allusion to the Diaghilev Ballets Russes in this brilliantly multi-layered work. There is even a nod to Nijinska's *Les Noces*, in the corps girls' babushkas.

Taylor heard the piano score, which ranges from the tinkly to the keyboard-pounding, as a silent-movie accompaniment to a crime melodrama, which he frames with a ballet rehearsal. The silent screen provided the characters and the action (a private eye, Oriental gangsters, a maternal-hearted moll, a kidnapping), the color scheme (black, white, and gray), the period for the décor (an Art Deco dressing table, a Constructivist chair that when reversed—shades of *Prodigal Son*—becomes a cradle), and the shallow stage space and flattened postures, referring both to Nijinsky's *Faune* and, a joke, to the two-dimensional images of the movie screen.

Taylor's musical instincts in *Le Sacre* are unerring. To the Introduction to Part One—not intended for dance, though this has never stopped post-Nijinsky choreographers from setting it—he has the dancers warming up. To the first pounding, rhythmic chords of the Auguries of Spring, couples perform a unison stomping and slam dance. The story ends, *Hamlet*-style, with a pile of corpses: each character stabs another, and when they run out of prop knives they use mime ones. The last remaining crook without thinking stabs himself, and just before expiring he manages to stab the bundled baby. A gray scrim descends. To the music of the Dance of the Chosen Maiden,

Taylor has set a solo for the grief-stricken mother. With its angularity, jagged rhythms, and angst, it bears more than a passing resemblance to early Martha Graham, who danced this role in Massine's 1930 New York staging of *Le Sacre*. (Legend has it that she actually choreographed this solo herself.)

The second premiere of the season, *Counterswarm*, to music by Gyorgy Ligeti, treats one of Taylor's favorite subjects, bugs. The dancers scurry sideways while facing front; they hold their arms in back of them with wrists touching and flutter their hands, like flies rubbing their wings together; they perform break-dance back spins, like overturned beetles. "Counter" refers to the two opposing teams into which Taylor has divided the dancers, the purples and the reds. The dance gradually turns into a battle, with group rumbles and a final showdown between a purple man and a red woman. A duet of aggression and violence ensues. At one point they run into each other at top speed and rebound. It ends in stalemate, the two locked together and staring into each other's eyes. The droning of the music would account for the bug imagery, but wherefore the jewel-toned *Schéhérazade*-style harem pants and turbans? An atavistic memory of Taylor's role in an insect ballet in

a 1954 *Arabian Nights* at Jones Beach? Somehow, though, it works.

Despite his brilliant navigating of the treacherous currents of Stravinsky's *Sacre*, if Taylor has one weakness it is musical. He tends to treat music as simply another "found" object, probably because of his reliance on records, which are in fact objects, when considering scores to choreograph. Thus Taylor does not hesitate to mix 'n' match movements of concertos and symphonies, just as he does gestures. The results can be disquieting.

It comes as something of a shock to realize that Taylor's troupe consists of only eighteen dancers, for they give the impression of being far more numerous. He lists them in the program not by rank (there are none), not alphabetically, in the populist manner of the Joffrey, but by loyalty—that is, length of tenure in the company. Loyalty is important to Taylor—the dancers are, after all, his kith and kin—but there is no dead wood. Among the technically amazing and personally distinctive dancers, two women stand out: Kate Johnson, for her legato flow of movement, musicality, and drama, and Cathy McCann for her understated grace and femininity.

Gallery-going

by Jed Perl

The only way to see contemporary art is by going to galleries, and the number of galleries that compete for the attention of a fairly limited number of gallery-goers is bewildering. Every month, hundreds of shows make an appeal to us either by virtue of the reputation of the artist or of the gallery or of both. And even with these swollen numbers, many of the most deserving artists are denied the distinguished presentation that their work really deserves. In the last couple of weeks of March, I must have seen a hundred shows in SoHo alone; what I culled from that number as being possibly worth writing about is less than a handful. I wouldn't necessarily conclude from this that art has gone to hell; it may just be that the scene is now so crowded with frauds, clones, and mediocrities that it's become a test of patience and willpower to find the genuine article. The bulk of the bad work is daunting; the variety of types of bad work is utterly confounding. Go to five shows and you may think you have a theory to explain it all. Go to twenty or thirty shows and you find your explanations falling away. The people who say they're interested in how the art world works or in the sociology of art are the people who aren't really involved. A true gallery-goer has only his eyes and his heart to guide him, and all he cares about is finding something to respond to.

On a particular day the real thing can be nowhere in sight; but you can never be sure where you're going to find it. That's why

you have to go everywhere. My list of worthwhile exhibitions in late March would include Joan Snyder's show uptown at Hirschl & Adler Modern, one of the most deluxe (and beautifully appointed) galleries in New York, and Ned Small's show downtown at First Street, a modest establishment that's regularly ignored in *Art in America* and other top-of-the-line publications. I can't link these two shows together, except to say that both of them were a reach for me. I'm made uneasy by an artist—Snyder in this case—who takes on explosive public subjects; and I'm inclined to see waffling in the soft-focus brand of realism that Ned Small makes his own. What holds me in both of these shows isn't the style so much as the feeling that informs the style.

Joan Snyder handles oil paint in a great variety of ways: with brush or palette knife, building it up or scraping it down, emphasizing the separateness of each stroke or working layer into layer. She's in love with the possibilities of paint, and her shifts of approach, both within a single painting and from painting to painting, suggest an intelligent sensualist—an artist who wants to find out exactly how many kinds of rapture paint can convey. When Snyder works twigs or nails or pieces of fabric into her paintings, these collage elements are an extension of the painter's craft. The best moments in Snyder's work are expansive; the centerpiece of her show—the twenty-four-foot-long *Morning Requiem (For the Children)*—is hot

and brassy, almost histrionic. All Snyder's work, including the serene landscape images of a couple of years ago, is dramatic; now, weeping for humanity, she's edging into melodrama. And yet when Snyder invokes strife in Central America, or makes little shrines out of news photographs of malnourished children, she manages to bring her mega-themes down to a painter's human scale.

Snyder's ripe colors and primal pastoral imagery of fields and skies often recall Van Gogh. (She may have felt the impact of the duet of Van Gogh exhibitions mounted at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1984 and 1986-7.) Her connection to Van Gogh has as much to do with his aestheticism as with his agonized consciousness. When Snyder builds a little epiphany by working together burning hot orange and cool yellow, she's emoting, but she's also making a bridge to the art-for-art's-sake tradition. (Painting in "Van Gogh" colors, Snyder echoes the late pastoral works of Braque, who gave us the greatest "aestheticization" of Van Gogh we've ever seen.) In a catalogue note, Snyder describes the origins of *Morning Requiem*. "The pain and suffering that our children are experiencing has obsessed me. I can no longer find words that explain the sickness, the insanity that abounds in our world and so I paint and paint . . . I began *Morning Requiem* with the barren vineyards of April and ended it with a field of sunrises for the children. With paint I can only be an optimist." In the paintings Snyder seems to be making a connection between her beautiful brushstrokes and all those beautiful defenseless children. Snyder makes politics personal—and what else can an artist do? She tells us how the world has changed her.

Ned Small's show at the First Street Gallery contained some largish, very ambitious paintings; a few of them had public themes. I couldn't make much sense out of *Soldiers and Heroes*, an indefinite gray-brown-black composition. A faceless crowd moves to and fro in a damp fog—it's like an Isabel Bishop canvas that's been left out in the rain.

When it comes to Small's figure compositions, the less said the better. Small only really finds himself when he works on a restricted format (a couple of feet at most); his best works are the two self-portraits (fourteen by eighteen inches). These heads—in which the face looms out of a muffling blanket of greenish-reddish color—are as self-absorbed and unworldly as Snyder's big collage compositions are extroverted and with-it. Small, who was born in 1949, studied in the early Seventies at the Swain School in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and he has the fondness for old-fashioned pictorial values that's a hallmark of Swain graduates. What Small brings to his two self-portraits is a psychological acumen that registers in the shifts in and out of focus, and in the movement from paint-as-flesh to paint-as-paint and back. When Small shows an eye dimmed by the shadow of a cap's brim, it's just a smear of dark, as if he's avoiding our (and his own) gaze. When the paint gives out before it reaches the edge of the piece of masonite he's working on, Small is telling us that he can't sustain the illusion. His self-portraits place him in the line of New York's eccentric realists—the painters who are broken-hearted as they contemplate the wreckage of the academic tradition. These two paintings are as good as many by Edwin Dickinson and Earl Kerkam (that's damn good). Two other portraits, a studio nude, a landscape called *Ruins*, a flower piece, and a still life sustain the richly melancholy mood.

Going through the galleries is like going through an enormous bazaar in which everything is for sale and what interests and delights, such as the paintings of Joan Snyder and Ned Small, is jumbled up with all the rest. The scale of the current scene puts it beyond any one person's power to effect significant change, and the gallery-goer who starts out upbeat, applauding a pluralist decade, will sooner or later retreat into cynicism and the over-intellectualization that's born of a desperate need for explanations. Artists can, to some degree, avoid gallery-going and discover in the privacy of the stu-

Arikha
 Balthus
 Braque
 Cezanne
 Dubuffet
 Frankenthaler
 Giacometti
 Graves
 Guston
 Hockney
 Johns
 Kelly
 de Kooning
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dio a usable aesthetic. But for the rest of us the only place to develop an aesthetic is in the galleries, and any aesthetic will have to be hearty enough to develop amidst conditions bordering on anarchy. If we can't find our liberation within or in spite of anarchy, we're dead. And if the gallery-goer can't formulate an aesthetic, the artists may all ultimately be dead, too, because a work of art must be completed in the eye of a beholder. When artists start to anticipate a viewer response, they end up with the overfinished, sepulchral mood that dominated Bill Jensen's show at the Washburn Gallery in April. Perhaps Jensen's best self is now stymied by the knowledge that the public that carried him to a deserved fame is an uncomprehending public. An aesthetic may be born in isolation or amidst confusion, but will it grow?

For those of us whose gallery-going days only date back as far as the early Seventies, the end of orthodoxy is a primal condition—a fact of life. No one style, no one view of history offers the promise of salvation. This is our reality, and we must extrapolate from it. It's natural that we should look back and see a history without orthodoxies or clear traditions. It's also natural for us to believe that the only relevant tradition is the tradition that an artist makes for himself. The entire history of art is now an Arabian bazaar—an archetypal Eighties institution like the Musée d'Orsay presents the whole unsorted heap—and our only defense against the dishonest and the second-rate is our freedom to choose. It's not that all history has become postmodern so much as that all history, including the history of modern art, has become premodern. The past has yet to be judged, and we can walk through the galleries (where past becomes present) in a condition of freedom—as free as the wanderer in an Arabian bazaar.

The only way to explain the crisis of the present is this: the more freedom is thrust upon us the more gallery-goers (and artists, too) run for the cover of the unfreedom of theories and ideas. Only a public scared out of its wits by the possibility of freedom could have been so utterly bamboozled by

George Condo's show at the Pace Gallery in March. Condo is one of the young painters (age thirty) who galloped out of the East Village at the beginning of the Eighties. His paintings—which are knock-offs of Picasso, Gorky, and others—come in both abstract and representational flavors; they have topics (Edith Piaf in the nude, the ascension), but no subjects. Condo is the artistic equivalent of a rapist: he's violating the Abstract Expressionists, the Picasso of the Twenties, Thirties, and Forties, and the styles of any number of Surrealists. No gallery show this season brought me quite so low, probably because I adore many of the styles Condo has done violence to. Condo doesn't understand that the closer you work to someone else's style, the more imperative it is that you be clear about who you are. He doesn't

know the difference between influence and impersonation—he doesn't know anything, least of all who he is in all of this. Yet clarity of thought or feeling isn't expected. Not knowing who you are is the basic pluralist condition. And there's always now the escape hatch of appropriation: if Condo's work doesn't succeed as painting, then it will succeed as some sort of comment on painting. Condo's surfaces are congested, closed-down. He's a parodist of freedom, painting icons for the unfree. And it's on exactly these terms that his work is accepted at the Pace Gallery, and accorded adulatory reviews in the *Times* and the *Village Voice*. The people who hype art are the least of our problems. It's the artists and critics who hate art but make it their business anyway whom we really have to watch out for.

“I am the greatest”: Kruger and Albers *by Richard B. Woodward*

The enthusiasm with which some critics have greeted “Picturing ‘Greatness,’” the photography exhibition organized by artist-photographer Barbara Kruger, is the best example of the swoon for anything that seems new at the Museum of Modern Art.¹ Anything that looks as if it breaks with the past has become cause for celebration. Even if shows are terrible or ho-hum, they are encouraged as instruments in the overthrow of an ossified regime. Questionable work is praised for fear the place will backslide into more shows about formalist experiment and great men. Denounce old MOMA and crown the new. People have stopped looking at art; they’re reviewing the institution. They’re pushing a program of sweeping change, even if this only means circling back to traditions long ago discredited.

Andy Grundberg, photography critic for *The New York Times*, set the tone in his early review of the Kruger show: “The result is a huge success. For the museum’s audience, it offers a chance to see firsthand how a new generation of artists and critics is responding to photographs as cultural evidence. For the museum’s photography department, it marks what one hopes is a new era of openness and experimentation.” Gary Indiana of

The Village Voice also heaped oodles of praise on the show. It must be Kruger’s presence that dazzles some critics, as though a young art star working from outside the museum guaranteed radical change and bold intelligence.

It didn’t. Except for being a welcome attempt at a theme show, “Picturing ‘Greatness’” was a complete botch, an unqualified disaster. It failed to make any case at all for its thesis, which was vague and conspiratorial; it hedged and double-dealt on crucial issues; and in purporting to de-escalate the status of the artist, it aggrandized the role of the curator. Make no mistake: Barbara Kruger was the star of this show.

“Picturing ‘Greatness’” exhibited mostly famous artists by mostly famous photographers. Arranged along the walls were pictures of Picasso and Matisse by Robert Capa, Brancusi and Rodin by Steichen, O’Keeffe and Demuth by Bill Brandt, John Marin by Irving Penn, and, in the only self-portrait here, Rodchenko—a curious choice. There were seven portraits of Picasso by five different photographers, and five photographs by Man Ray of three different artists—the tops in their categories.

This was a friendly show, a throwback to the Fifties when Edward Steichen directed the Department of Photography, a kind of “Family of Man (Ray).” From all reports the crowds have been curious and pleased. As Christopher Phillips reported in *Art in America*, people admired the artists along

¹ “Picturing ‘Greatness’” was on view at the Museum of Modern Art from January 14 through March 29. The show was discussed briefly in the April issue of *The New Criterion* in Roger Kimball’s article, “Is MOMA Attempting Suicide?”

the walls and sailed clear of the enormous wall label that stood like a central tunnel support in the middle of the gallery. It was a charming show that asked nothing of the visitor except that he look at some outstanding pictures of people we knew were famous and important because their work was installed a few hundred yards away. You've seen the art; now meet the artist.

Of course, we were missing the point. According to the wall label, which was pretty impossible to miss, and those quotation marks around greatness, this show was designed not to celebrate but to challenge the idea of mastery, especially the image of it put forward by institutions like MOMA. As the label explained it:

These images of artistic "greatness" are from the collection of this museum. As we tend to become who we are through a dense crush of allowances and denials, inclusions and absences, we can begin to see how approval is accorded through the languages of "greatness," that heady brew concocted with a slice of visual pleasure, a pinch of connoisseurship, a mention of myth and a dollop of money. But these images can also suggest how we are seduced into the world of appearances, into a pose of who we are and who we aren't. They can show us how vocation is ambushed by cliché and snapped into stereotype by the camera, and how photography freezes moments, creates prominence and makes history.

This passage is so thick with metaphor it's hard to grab hold of the ideas. I have read it more than a dozen times and I still can't decide who is to blame for what. We (which should also come equipped with quotation marks) have been "seduced," "ambushed," "crushed." But by whom—photographers and artists, museums and magazines, or photography itself? Or are they in cahoots? The tone suggests that we have been duped and that a critical examination of these photographs could free us from cliché.

The show makes neither formal nor chronological sense. There *is* no cliché of the artist in photography, no tradition of greatness.

These photographs don't "create prominence"; they borrow it from the permanent collection of painting and sculpture. Except that they work with chisels and brushes, artists don't look any different from writers, physicists, editors, actors, dancers, or curators from any period one could name. They don't look sadder than farmers, more glamorous than movie stars. What conceivable type could they look like? Rogi-Andre's wonderful portrait of Derain, who looks here like the circus strongman, has nothing in common—except modernist fame—with Nickolas Muray's shot of Monet at Giverny during the last year of his life.

The selection of work dates from 1905 (Gertrude Käsebier's *Rodin*) to c. 1960 (Steichen's *Brancusi*), with the majority bunched in the late Twenties to early Fifties. It might be instructive to examine portraits of artists from a narrow period—the first decade of the century or the last five years—and try to arrive at some conclusions about the way famous artists are presented. A style can dominate an era. Steichen's dramatic lighting influenced photographers (and cinematographers) throughout the Twenties and Thirties. But he didn't treat Rodin differently from any other famous assignment.

This portrait of Rodin posed as "The Thinker," which Grundberg called the "show's most obvious cliché," is a chiaroscuro tour-de-force. Asking the foremost sculptor of his day to mimic his most recognizable work was silly and almost cruel, like asking Barnett Newman to stand beside a fire pole. But Rodin went along with the idea. He collaborated with Steichen in advertising himself and his work. This interesting issue in celebrity portraiture—how photographer and subject often work together as a team—is implied in the show, but never sorted out.

More annoying than her failure to demonstrate or define her aims is the hypocrisy of Kruger's placing herself at the center of the show. At an exhibition intended to undermine notions of grandeur, to question the authority by which some artists are deemed worthy of imitation or reverence, she has constructed a wall label that is un-

mistakably like her own artwork: billboard-size, thick type, bordered in red. In its scale and quirky language, it dominates the proceedings; at least it tries to. Like Muhammad Ali or Rene, the artist in SoHo whose graffiti proclaims himself world famous, Kruger seems to say: "I Am the Greatest."

By choosing the most familiar artists by the most familiar photographers, she casts herself as the iconoclast; everyone here looks domestic and institutionalized compared to the hip curator. But who chose these images from the vast collection at MOMA, and who said the selection had to confine itself there? In a prize sentence from the label, Kruger writes of the selection: "Vibrating with inspiration yet implacably well-behaved, visceral yet oozing with all manner of refinement, almost all are male and almost all are white." This sounds like a snide *review* of the show rather than information about the reasoning that went into it. It's crazy: it reads as if she were denouncing the curator—who is herself! Who decided to show the funny, if demeaning, photo of Gloria Vanderbilt Whitney gingerly touching the behind of a nude male statue? And who installed it near Capa's portrait of Picasso at the Louvre, in shorts and open shirt, leaning against one of the *Slaves* of Michelangelo with the bored nonchalance of someone waiting for a bus in Florida? Who put together this show? A white, male curator?

Every artist here became famous at least forty years ago, approximately when Barbara Kruger was born. With an advantage over a hidebound curator in his sixties and, one assumes, a natural bias toward artists of her generation, she chose the stalest and most out-of-date photos possible. These look like the pictures that Steichen would have installed, though he would have omitted the ironic punctuation. Couldn't Kruger have bolstered her argument with "great" photos of Johns, Serra, or Salle?

In a show about photography, its supposed influence in determining how we magnify artists and ourselves, why was only one photographer portrayed? Was the Rodchenko self-portrait a clue? Do photog-

raphers portray themselves distinctly? Was this a coded message about the self-reflexive nature of the medium, or an inside joke for the cognoscenti of Sherrie Levine? It was impossible to tell.

For the last twenty-six years under its present director John Szarkowski, the Department of Photography at MOMA has steadfastly refused to collect or show pictures of people just because they were famous. It's one of its hallmarks. Turning away from theme shows of epic sweep, Szarkowski has helped to instill critical appreciation for a photographic aesthetic distinct from the other arts. He was one of the first to mount solo shows by relative unknowns—from Lartigue to Eggleston—and let their work stand on its own.

Kruger could have selected any number of photographs collected during Szarkowski's tenure. To take only a few obvious examples: Garry Winogrand's horrifying shot of Calder at a MOMA reception in his honor, in which the aged artist sits at a table, his mouth agog while the crowd hovers. Or any number of self-portraits—the spiky ones by Lee Friedlander, the garish and distorted views by Lucas Samaras, or the satyric nude by John Coplans. Or Cindy Sherman's picture of herself as a distressed teenager on a lonely mountain road. Of course, in these photographs the artists don't look so great.

To ignore "Picturing 'Greatness'" would be easy were not the reception in many quarters so loud and approving. The noise has drowned out attention for a small show at MOMA of Josef Albers photographs mounted at the same time,² as an incongruous coda to the main rooms that featured "Committed to Print," the exhibition of post-1960 social and political art.

Selected by Szarkowski and organized by the American Federation of Arts (not MOMA), the show was modest and intelligent. Concerned with formal innovation, it was an island of peace amid the din

2 "The Photographs of Josef Albers" was on display from March 10 through April 19.

from the other shows. Albers is virtually unknown as a photographer. The work, dating from the late 1920s and early 1930s, remained undiscovered until shortly after his death in 1976 and unexhibited until now.

Some of the photographs looked like the standard Bauhaus product: mundane objects and scenes viewed from unusual angles, spooky mannequins, studies in shadow and pattern. But even some of these exceeded the norm: e.g., a picture of about fifty birds perched on eight phone wires. The whites of their bodies are smudged, reflecting light, the wires faint and almost rubbed out. It's a photograph with the touch of a painting—an Agnes Martin.

The revelation of the show, however, comes from the way Albers mounted the work as multiple images on a single page. In what were clearly experiments, he arranged sequences of shots, from two to as many as twelve on a page, setting photos of similar subjects against each other—sometimes perpendicular, sometimes stepped up or down in scale; with a group of ten on top and a large, single image on the bottom, or with all the photographs the same size.

In most of these sequences he is playing with portraits, of friends and Bauhaus colleagues. As an ironic (and deliberate?) counterpoint to Kruger's show, many of these photos capture famous artists off-guard: Klee, El Lissitzky, Ozenfant, Kandinsky. Did we not know their names and in some cases their faces, we would never identify them as great figures. Instead, they stand out as strong photographs, especially a single portrait of Klee in which his face looks worn and smooth, as though polished by fire. An undoctored shot, it looks as if he were modeling for his death mask.

The chief reason for admiring this work is its advanced position within tradition. As Szarkowski points out in his catalogue essay, these photographs anticipate by nearly forty years the interest in sequential, polypychal imagery evidenced by Ray Metzker, Warhol, and Rauschenberg, who was a student of Albers's.³ The tradition has flour-

ished and become a common strategy for contemporary photographers.

But even if this later work hadn't happened, Albers's twelve views of a woman named Marli Heimann would be extraordinary. Taken over the course of an hour, the four larger shots show her face in full shadow and direct sunlight, staring right, then left. Below are eight tiny portraits, grayer, less modeled. In all the shots she is smiling or laughing. The entire sequence, in which no single photo is special, has the feeling of a diary entry by Albers: a dear friend or lover observed during a pleasant day. It jumps like a home movie except that it has a plan: the twelve shots over an hour's length become a subtle, unsentimental elegy for the passing of time.

The Albers exhibition concentrated old MOMA at its best: the uncovering of previously neglected connections to a pictorial tradition, the patient inspection of a body of work, the discovery of an unknown phase of a modern artist. Szarkowski represents the essence of old MOMA, just as Kruger's stint as guest host of "Picturing 'Greatness'" showed off the nadir of the new.

It's amazing that some critics can encourage novelty like the Kruger show, even if MOMA's photography department has not looked its sharpest in recent years. As Szarkowski's time runs down—he is at work on a massive critical history of photography for 1990, likely his last show—the museum will be fortunate if it names someone as thoughtful. Lately he has allowed younger curators to mount shows that didn't necessarily meet his standards. He can't have liked the Kruger, unless he thought it would serve to further discredit Steichen's approach to photography. For years critics like A.D. Coleman, Andy Grundberg, and Gary Indiana have denounced or ignored Szarkowski's approach to photography—which may be one sign of his greatness.

3 Szarkowski, for some reason, does not mention Dali's photo-collages from the early Thirties, in which he used sequential imagery.

The remains of Katherine Mansfield

by Gloria G. Fromm

Katherine Mansfield's short life (1888-1923) has had a long tangled biographical history, starting with the ambiguous instructions she left for her husband and literary executor, John Middleton Murry. In a letter written a few months before she died, she told him to do what he liked with all her manuscripts, to keep whatever he wished and destroy the rest. But she went on to remind him of her "love of tidiness" and to hope for "a clean sweep [that would] leave all fair." Then in her formal will, drawn up just a week later, she asked him point blank to "publish as little as possible and to tear up and burn as much as possible"—this, she explained, because she wanted to remove all the "traces" of her "camping ground."

Katherine Mansfield must have known that Murry would find it virtually impossible to carry out these last wishes, and one can only assume—along with Claire Tomalin in her new biography¹—that she was of two minds herself about the disposition of her private papers. As a result, whether intended or not, Murry was launched on a caretaking career that for its lucrative and exploitive side would earn him the reputation of being "the best-hated man of letters in the country." Between 1923 and his own death in 1957, he published volume after volume of his wife's literary remains, including early sketches, unfinished stories, a journal in two

different versions, a scrapbook, and letters that were carefully selected and skillfully edited. In other words, Murry was pulling the strings that Katherine Mansfield had left dangling for him. His contemporaries may have felt (to put it mildly) that he did not have his wife's best interests at heart, but close inspection reveals that he was actually more faithful to the dead Katherine Mansfield than he had been to the living.

Like a man with a sacred mission, absolutely certain of his charge, Murry set about purifying and sanctifying as well as over-praising Katherine Mansfield. In the eyes of many of their friends, however, he took her far too seriously for anybody's good. Leonard Woolf, whose own wife found Katherine Mansfield a tease and a puzzle, lamented years later that not a trace of her "gay, cynical, amoral, ribald" nature remained in Murry's posthumous creation. He had turned the woman who could speak the language of "a fishwife in Wapping"—as her painter friend Carrington put it—into the "child withouten stain" of his mawkish memorial poem. *His* Mansfield was meant to have the magical freshness, innocence, and simplicity of extreme youth, indeed was bound up with her childhood in New Zealand, the scene of her most celebrated stories. Yet even here, Murry could have been taking his cue from Katherine Mansfield herself, who had played the child often enough both in and out of fiction. As things happened, he was right to work at keeping her as young as

1 *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life*, by Claire Tomalin; Knopf, 292 pages, \$22.95.

possible: it produced the Mansfield cult of the Twenties and Thirties that has never completely died out despite the gap between the “enchanted spirit” of the legend and the reckless, driven, mendacious woman of the three full-scale biographies published in the past decade.² This woman looks like the real thing, pretty much the same person for Antony Alpers, Jeffrey Meyers, and Claire Tomalin, despite the different coloration and emphasis they provide. Meyers paints the darkest picture of all, but instead of disputing it (though she rightly calls it “cynical”) Tomalin adds her own grim touches with new medical information about the venereal basis for Mansfield’s persistent illnesses. Otherwise Tomalin’s life is mainly a re-assembling rather than a re-casting of the materials already made available by Alpers and Meyers. Yet the story she re-tells—of gifts unused and misused, of uncontrolled disease and self-destruction—has not lost its human appeal. Quite the contrary: one is tempted to ask whether Mansfield’s Life—released at last from Murry’s stewardship—has now begun to overwhelm the Art and turn the stories into appendages, or whether they can manage to survive the knowledge made possible in a post-Murry age.

Within Murry’s lifetime, two significant biographies appeared. The later one, by young Antony Alpers, came out only a few years before Murry died and has since been thoroughly revised and expanded. The earlier one, the very first biography of Katherine Mansfield, was published a decade after her death and actually listed Murry as co-author. Not surprisingly, it emphasized her formative years. Although Murry claimed in his introduction that all the research and much of the narrative was the work of Ruth Mantz, the decision to end the book in 1912

—when Murry and Mansfield had begun to live together—was undoubtedly his.³ The rest of the story *belonged* to him, he felt, and was already being told in his laundered first version of Katherine Mansfield’s *Journal* (1927), another creation that might not have displeased her quite as much as his critics claimed. She might even have approved the focus in Mantz’s book on the making of a young writer, on the gifts and the promise rather than on the losing struggle during the next ten years to ward off consumption. The toll such a struggle took on Katherine Mansfield was not a pleasant sight and Murry had little stomach for it. Nor did he try to hide from her his fear of contagion as well as his distaste for the physical manifestations of TB, which was finally diagnosed in 1918. Even before then, indeed from 1915 on, they lived apart more often than not, writing the letters that provide us with a detailed view of their intensely troubled relationship. In the last years especially, she sought relief abroad from the symptoms constantly plaguing her but also from Murry himself, whom most of the time she seemed to dislike. She was certainly always telling him what was wrong with him, berating him for his squeamishness, his selfishness, his stinginess. He had the irritating habit, she would complain, of taking the best room for himself and his own writing, expecting her to look after him and the household as well, all of which she resented on principle. But the platonic idea of him was another matter altogether. During each separation, as her letters make painfully clear, she could look forward with feverish excitement to their next reunion, in spite of the fact that time and again the reality did not measure up. Even when they travelled together, things were never right. He would lose their tickets or find he had been cheated or forget to take the necessary precautions against bad weather so that a journey in

2 In addition to Claire Tomalin’s book, the other biographies are *The Life of Katherine Mansfield*, by Antony Alpers, first published by Viking in 1953 and reissued in an expanded edition by Viking in 1980; and *Katherine Mansfield: A Biography*, by Jeffrey Meyers (New Directions, 1978).

3 This earliest biography is entitled *The Life of Katherine Mansfield*, by Ruth Elvish Mantz and John Middleton Murry (Constable & Company Ltd., London, 1933).

search of health would often make her ill. On the one hand, she claimed to want him to look after her; on the other, she wanted nothing better than to lead a life independent of him. That these were contradictory wishes made no difference at all: she kept both of them to the very end.

Their relationship began harmlessly enough. When they met in 1911, Murry was an undergraduate at Oxford, editing an avant-garde journal called *Rhythm*, and Mansfield had just published her first volume of stories, *In a German Pension*. Some of these stories had already appeared in *The New Age*, a much-talked-about weekly edited by A. R. Orage, with the help of Beatrice Hastings, both of whom played their own curious roles in Katherine Mansfield's life and career. For the moment they were printing her cruel little Bavarian sketches and making her known in literary London in the heady days before the Great War, when Aesthetes and Decadents, Edwardians and Georgians, all converged on modernism. The forward-looking Murry felt privileged to meet Katherine Mansfield, who had sent him a fairy tale for *Rhythm* which he rejected and then a surprisingly brutal story about New Zealand which he promptly accepted. Shortly after this, she invited him to live in the spare room of her flat in the Gray's Inn Road. It was not long before they became lovers, again at her suggestion.

He could scarcely have known much about Katherine Mansfield when he moved into her flat. As Kathleen Beauchamp (Mansfield was her middle name), she had emigrated to London from Wellington, New Zealand, in 1908. Before then, from 1903 to 1906, she had been a student at Queen's College in London, along with her two older sisters; and it took two years to persuade her wealthy banker-father to allow her to return. Providing a decent middle-class education for his daughters was one thing; it was quite another to agree to let her live in the capital as an aspiring writer, especially since she had already picked up some 1890s ideas that worried him. But having been told she was talented, he gave his permission, as

well as a yearly allowance of £100, hoping—one assumes—that relatives and family friends in England would serve as surrogate parents.

Vain hope indeed. There is no doubt whatever that Kathleen Beauchamp escaped from bourgeoisdom directly into catastrophe. The experiences of her hectic first years on her own—the pregnancies, miscarriages, and/or abortions—have not been fully sorted out even now, nor have all the principals been named. But it scarcely matters who was responsible for which pregnancy or for infecting her with the gonorrhea that Claire Tomalin persuasively argues made Katherine Mansfield susceptible to the TB that killed her. (She is less convincing when she points to D. H. Lawrence as the source of Mansfield's TB, during the short time they lived near each other.) The important point is that the venereal infection probably dates from as early as 1909 and caused one debilitating ailment after another: peritonitis, arthritis, pericarditis, pleurisy, rheumatism. With total justification, Tomalin describes Katherine Mansfield as "a chronic invalid" from 1910 on—from the young age, that is, of twenty-two, before she met Murry and through virtually her entire writing life. As if this were not enough, she had acquired a husband, too, before Murry appeared on the scene—one George Bowden—whom she left the night of their wedding. There was no divorce, however, until 1918, the year of her legal marriage to Murry.

Nearly everyone supposes that she forced herself to marry Bowden because she was pregnant with another man's child and that she instantly regretted it. But the child never materialized, and both the marriage and the pregnancy remain mysterious from beginning to end. So does the behavior of Kathleen Beauchamp's mother, who sailed to England immediately on hearing of the marriage, arrived after it had taken place, whisked her daughter off to a Bavarian spa, and left her there. Whether Mrs. Beauchamp herself was aware of the pregnancy is not known. She might have believed (as Bowden did) that her daughter had rejected him

because she was under the influence of a “lesbian” friend, one of those dangerous modern influences to which Kathleen was receptive and from which she would have had to be removed posthaste. The suspected friend was Ida Baker, a schoolmate at Queen’s College and fixated on Katherine Mansfield all her life, who would also claim years later complete ignorance of any such label. Ida Baker may have been as innocent as she claimed, but Kathleen Beauchamp’s imagination—as her letters and journal show—had easily absorbed both Oscar Wilde and Marie Bashkirtseff, the febrile Russian diarist. In fact, she was already moving beyond them.

Whatever the reason for the exodus to Bavaria, it provided Katherine Mansfield with the setting for a group of bitter and disillusioned stories. They may have been influenced by the free-wheeling Beatrice Hastings of *The New Age*, who is said to have instructed Katherine Mansfield in “swank and bitchiness,” but their obsessions were clearly her own: bourgeois family life and men with voracious appetites for food and sex. These crude little sketches certainly harp on the injustice and indecencies suffered by German women at the hands of brutish men, but they are even more important as early examples of the transpositional techniques that Katherine Mansfield would develop in her fiction. The loathsome Germans were stand-ins for a repellent self seen through middle-class Beauchamp eyes. Their place would be taken in due course by the corrupt and heartless French, whose lives—as she was to observe in increasingly moralistic letters to Murry—likewise turned obsessively on sex.

It is hard not to wonder just how conscious she was that her targets struck so close to home. Or that the writing name she chose for herself—Mans/field—had such complex reverberations. Or, indeed, that certain life-experiences were beginning to repeat themselves in alarming ways. Did she notice that, when she got what she had asked for or fought for, either it turned out

to be not worth having after all or it practically blew up in her face? These alternating results are far more likely the twin pivots of her emotional life than anger and aggression, or conflict and ambivalence, or a craving for the lost Paradise of childhood, as various critics have claimed. In the psychic drama Katherine Mansfield seemed driven to enact, all the recurrent crises kept spelling out for her a terribly palpable truth about existence, not that human beings had to lose Paradise but that there was no Paradise for them to lose.

This is why Ida Baker’s slavish devotion was scorned while Murry’s, inconstant and uncertain, remained a prize to be won, and why the death in France of her younger brother Leslie, early in the war, had so profound an effect upon her. She identified with him completely, precisely because of the way he was killed—by a defective grenade that exploded in his hand as he was teaching his men how to use it. Most commentators have seen Leslie’s death as a crucial stage in Katherine Mansfield’s artistic development, arguing that it impelled her to transform the longer and looser story begun as “The Aloe” into the more refined “Prelude” and to go on re-creating their New Zealand past as a memorial to him. But these stories, whether inspired by Leslie or not, also carry the message—about intense longings and their ultimate lack of worth—that Katherine Mansfield was reading into the destructive life she had made for herself. The Burnell and Sheridan families, presented mainly through youthful narrative eyes and resembling the New Zealand Beauchamps but by no means portraits of them, are all shown poised on the brink of awareness; the very air they breathe is suffused with Mansfield’s own knowledge, with the sadness that for her had to come from joy. “Prelude” was indeed an introduction to the prime matter of its author’s consciousness, expressing far more than she realized.

Yet, as the New Critics of the Forties and Fifties demonstrated, the New Zealand family stories could be read with little help from biography. This is equally true of them

today, for the timeless world they evoke is self-contained and self-explanatory. The stories that now present problems are those with urban settings and adult points of view rather than a child's, stories whose human content can only be described as puerile. They fail largely because Katherine Mansfield could not deal on any realistic level with relationships between adults, but also because she refrained from expressing certain feelings connected with Murry. Oddly enough, she had no trouble writing the cruellest letters to him, but she held herself back in fiction. Two stories in particular make use of him evasively and counter-productively: "Je ne parle pas français" (1918) and "The Man Without a Temperament" (1920), both written while she was spending the winter abroad and sent to him in England.

"Je ne parle pas français" is narrated by a thoroughly unpleasant self-centered Frenchman (Duquette) modeled on Murry's friend Francis Carco, with whom Katherine Mansfield had a brief affair during the war. In the story, Murry appears as Duquette's English friend, who brings a young woman named Mouse to Paris with the promise of marriage and then deserts her. His friend Duquette deserts her too, so that—defenseless, unable to speak the language—she has been thrown presumably to the French wolves. The symbolic intent is only too obvious, but the person with whom we are meant to sympathize scarcely exists; the narrator is of no consequence; and Harmon the Englishman is sketched with the lightest of brushes. If the story has any interest at all, it lies in the cowardly way Harmon leaves the girl—with a letter she finds after he is gone. Mansfield's own cowardice lies in her refusal to allow the real subject of this story to be expressed, even though elsewhere she made it plain—that, instead of looking after her, as Leonard Woolf so obviously looked after *his* wife, Murry had abandoned her to illness.

"The Man Without a Temperament" tells the opposite story of a husband who tends his ailing wife so conscientiously that there

is no time left for feeling—they are dead to each other. Critics generally agree that the husband is a reverse-image of Murry, the indirect portrait of a man who could *not* take care of his wife. But the story has only this slight biographical interest. Otherwise, as the study of a situation and a relationship, it seems pure fantasy.

Even stories acclaimed for their virtuosity—"Bliss," "Miss Brill," "The Daughters of the Late Colonel"—suffer from what I will call unbelievability. Their skill and economy are undeniable; they are admirable artifacts; but they have virtually nothing to say. Obscured for years by critical emphasis on the craft of the short story, to which Katherine Mansfield made a genuine contribution, the ordinariness of her vision is now all too apparent. She had no originality of mind, only great technical facility, and at the level of prose meaning most of her fiction cannot be taken seriously. Instead of the richness and resonance one finds in Virginia Woolf, there is only thinness and hollowness in Katherine Mansfield. Instead of the brilliant complexity D. H. Lawrence achieved in stories like "The White Stocking" and "Tickets, Please," Katherine Mansfield offers the oblique and inadequate symbolism of "The Fly," one of her last completed works, in which a successful businessman, reminded of his son lost in the war, whom he has more or less forgotten, plays "wantonly" with a fly in an ink bottle. But the lines from *King Lear* invoked by admirers of the story are no substitute for the emotional coherence it lacks.

It may be true that by then she was already too ill to write fiction. Yet she managed to put an extraordinary finishing touch on her life, which seems to me a story in itself and perhaps the best one she ever "wrote." Against Murry's wishes, who she kept saying was not taking care of her anyway, she placed herself in the hands of a peripatetic foreigner named George Gurdjieff. It was a desperate measure on her part that nevertheless, in retrospect, makes perfect sense, bringing together all the elements of an astonishingly chaotic life.

Gurdjieff, with his mysterious Eastern background and a commanding faith in himself as a guru and healer, had turned up in London early in 1922. Endorsed by the popular Russian philosopher Ouspensky, Gurdjieff won enough financial backing to enable him to settle down on a large estate in France known as Le Prieuré, near Fontainebleau, here to establish his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. Believing that people's bodies, minds, and emotions no longer worked in harmony, that civilization had produced a fatal imbalance, Gurdjieff proposed to right the balance by a regimen of hard physical labor and self-discipline. His disciples (about a hundred to start with, mostly Russians but with Katherine Mansfield's old friend Orage among them) were always being tested by their "master," living in primitive circumstances while they worked on restoring the long-neglected buildings of the former monastery. Katherine Mansfield arrived here in the middle of October, 1922, about two weeks after Gurdjieff himself and his entourage. She was clearly a dying woman for whom Gurdjieff did not pretend to have a cure. In fact, at first she was only supposed to stay for a short while, "under observation," as it were, but she wound up remaining until her death in January.

During her more than two months under Gurdjieff's absolute rule, she endured as much hardship as he thought she could tolerate, to all of which (unheated rooms, lack of bathing facilities, menial kitchen labors) she meekly submitted as part of what she claimed to believe was her last chance at health. Her body was not healing, she had decided, because her spirit was sick. This was how she explained why none of the doctors she had been seeing for years had done her any good, and why she refused to enter a sanatorium. Her choice of Gurdjieff, however, must have seemed quite mad. In his manner and appearance, he was a throwback to the coarse Bavarians of her early stories and experiences: "a gross drinker, eater and fornicator," in Claire Tomalin's words. Murry was utterly repelled by him but Kath-

erine Mansfield thought he could help her turn back the clock. She wanted to start over again, to get rid of the pretensions and corruption of the past decade, so that when Gurdjieff put her on a platform above the cowshed, to inhale the rising smell of dung, she thought his diagnosis and prescription were brilliant. All the accounts confirm that she was happier at the Institute than she had been for years. At her request, Murry did not come for a visit until January, and he found her "radiant." In high spirits on his first evening, reckless to the end, she bounded up the staircase to her room and set off a fatal hemorrhage.

There is nothing in Katherine Mansfield's fiction that remotely resembles the story of her life. She belongs as much to psycho-social as to literary history—one of those early moderns in transition who were caught between present and past, between the drive toward sexual freedom and autonomy and the lure of safety and authority. With deep middle-class roots and longings she played at bohemianism and discovered too late that it did not suit her in the least. Yet the mix of ingredients, salacious, ironic, idealistic, has provided her biographers with a powerful tale that compels not only wonder—but belief.

More than meets the eye

Harry Rand Manet's Contemplation at the Gare St. Lazare. University of California Press, 158 pages, \$29.95

reviewed by Eric Gibson

Poor Manet. In life he was misunderstood by friends as well as enemies; and now in death his art seems fated to fall prey to wildly conflicting interpretations. To some he's the strict formalist, while to others he's the canny social critic. Yet when we finally get to the paintings themselves, we cannot help feeling something vital has been left out of much of the discussion—Manet himself.

Harry Rand, curator of painting and sculpture at the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., poet, and author of an important book on Arshile Gorky, has now come forward with his view of the artist. Rand's approach to Manet is self-consciously different from those of such predecessors as Michael Fried or T. J. Clark. Where they focused on Manet's entire output, seeing in it either pure painting on a flat surface or figures enmeshed in an economic matrix, Rand acts as an iconographer—a decoder of the artist's symbolic language—and restricts himself to a single painting, *The Gare St. Lazare* (1873) in the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

In this painting, Manet gives us a contemporary urban vignette: a woman and child, elegantly dressed, are posed outdoors in front of a railing. Through the steam behind them (discharged by a passing train) enough of the landscape is visible for the knowledgeable viewer to discern a detail of the Pont de L'Europe, and thus to locate the Gare St. Lazare of the title just outside the right edge of the painting. Victorine Meurent, Manet's model for such earlier works as *Olympia* (1863), is the woman. She is seated near the ground and gazes out at us, having just been interrupted while reading. An open book and a sleeping puppy lie in her lap. The child standing at her left is Suzanne Hirsch, the daughter of Alphonse Hirsch, a painter friend of Manet's in whose garden the scene is set. In contrast to Victorine, Suzanne looks into the space of the picture, facing away from us, and is visible only in a three-quarter view from the left.

The Gare St. Lazare is an important painting in Manet's career. It is one of the earliest to show him moving away from a style that fused realist subjects with self-conscious borrowings from the Old Masters, a mode of painting exemplified in *Olympia*. The new manner of *The Gare St. Lazare*, arrived at under the influence of younger artists like Monet and Renoir, embraces elements of Impressionism, notably the treatment of everyday subjects set in the open air.

Rand's book takes issue with this accepted view of the painting. He proposes that *The Gare St. Lazare* isn't a transitional, realist-Impressionist painting but is instead a Symbolist work. Just as the literary Symbolists believed in re-creating (by means of symbols) the inner experience of the visible world rather than simply recording its outward aspect, Manet, according to Rand, wished to contrive "a realm of relationships and ideas parallel to the apprehensible world." The painting's true subject, in this view, is consciousness itself, degrees of inward and outward awareness; as Rand puts it, "thought becomes the protagonist in actual (portrayed) space." The key elements in this scenario are of course the figures, both individually and in relation to each other. But everything else has a meaning, too. The dog in Victorine's lap, a bunch of grapes near Suzanne—every motif, every detail in the painting contributes, for Rand, to the inner world Manet is at pains to construct in *The Gare St. Lazare*.

Rand invokes what he sees as plausible reasons for the artist to attempt a Symbolist sort of picture: his ten-year friendship with the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, founder of the Symbolist movement in literature; the artist's own 1867 portrait of the novelist Emile Zola, which contains iconographic references similar to those which Rand finds in the later painting; and, oddly, Manet's earlier practice of quoting the Old Masters, for example basing his *Olympia* on Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. If Manet used one sort of allusion that his public was slow to notice—so the logic goes—couldn't there just as easily be another we are only seeing now?

Appealing as it is to be offered another approach to Manet, particularly at a time when art criticism seems more concerned with enlisting a work of art in a partisan cause than in simply revealing it, Rand's "reading" of *The Gare St. Lazare* is one we can't go along with. It is simply too far-fetched. Since Manet is notorious for the paucity of documentary material he bequeathed to history, Rand must rely mostly on his own powers of persuasion as he first

"interprets" the painting and then compares it to Mallarmé's poetry. Unfortunately, in neither task is he successful. Rand too often sees similarities where only differences exist.

In discussing *The Gare St. Lazare*, Rand allows a single motif to launch him on a train of ideas that only gathers speed as it heads toward implausible destinations. For example, he looks at the sleeping puppy in Victorine's lap and concludes that the animal must be dreaming. Unverifiable as this claim is, it permits him to promote the puppy from incidental to co-equal player in the interpretive scheme. The dog, in Rand's view, plots the third point on the painting's "graph of consciousness." Victorine is a mature adult woman who has passed from inwardness to outward contemplation. Suzanne is somewhat lower on the evolutionary scale, being but a callow little girl, and she has a different orientation to reality. Though looking out at the world (toward the steam cloud), she's lost in reverie and so withdrawn from it. And the puppy, the lowest life form of all, experiences the ultimate inward state, sleep, busily contemplating, according to Rand, its own (canine) dream images.

The dog inspires further ideas: that in juxtaposing animal and book in Victorine's lap Manet "fashioned a grand ligature between culture and biology, between experience and its sublimation in artifacts, of which painting is a special example"; that the painting is "an account of the fauna one might encounter while wandering the precincts of a great city"; that "this is the true afternoon of dozing animals, of all animals including those who, like the child, graze"; and that the dog in Victorine's lap is "a surrogate for, or displacement of, the pubis."

Nor does Rand stop there. Victorine's interrupted-reader pose, he tells us, relates to that of the Virgin of Humility in Annunciation scenes, where Mary is surprised by the Angel Gabriel. With Victorine looking out of *The Gare St. Lazare*, the spectator becomes the Angel Gabriel; Manet, meanwhile, becomes the wounded Christ. Manet's

"sufferings caused by the *Olympia*," Rand writes, "may have turned his mind to archetypal suffering, which prompted him to produce the *Christ With Angels*, 1884, the year after the *Olympia*." This is all very bizarre.

Where not over-interpreting, Rand simply invents. He tells us that the little girl's right arm, which we cannot see, has just popped a grape into her mouth from the adjacent bunch to her right, and may be about to perform the same action again. This assertion, which has the curious effect of transforming the painting into a kind of motion-picture freeze frame, allows Rand to find a broad range of meanings on the subjects of taste and touch. Traditionally, he says, artistic images of eating and drinking, as in Velázquez's *Los Borrachos*, show "a coarse bodily activity." Manet circumvents this problem by showing Suzanne "not eating but only suggested as eating." Thus her "nibbling" is for Rand "a tantalizingly unseen (corporeal) act" that suggests an analogy to "immaterial things, to a certain aura of the past, as well as to the child's interior psychological world." We then learn just what the little girl is doing. "She is pictured in reverie as she alternately integrates complete forms from wisps of steam and then, attracted by a single part, fixes on that as the whole cloud vanishes."

Rand's comments about Mallarmé aren't quite in the same league as dreaming puppies or the Angel Gabriel, but they're no more persuasive. Rand acknowledges one point against his argument: Manet and Mallarmé were indeed friends for a decade—eventually; but the friendship was very young when Manet began working on *The Gare St. Lazare*. It is difficult to see how the artist could have painted anything as thoroughly Mallarméan as Rand claims *The Gare St. Lazare* to be as early as 1873. On another matter Rand is on equally soft ground. The symbols in Manet's portrait of Zola—the reproductions in the background of *Olympia* and of Velázquez's *Los Borrachos*—are overt, accessible symbols of Manet's historical

alliances. They are thus utterly different from the “symbols” Rand finds in the later painting and do nothing to support his “reading.” The fact that Manet’s allusions are all on the surface in *Zola* ought to have told Rand something about *The Gare St. Lazare*, but it didn’t.

Nonetheless, Rand tries, seeing “massive congruences” of artistic language and ambition in Manet and Mallarmé—essentially that both men eschewed the concrete, seeking instead to evoke what can’t be depicted or named: pure sensation. Manet in *The Gare St. Lazare* and Mallarmé in *L’Après-midi d’un faune* are united by their common use of dream imagery, Rand says, going so far as to claim a correspondence between a description of dreaming in the *Faun Cycle*, a series of preparatory poems, and the sleeping puppy’s “innocent and necessarily pagan dream.” The dog again.

But try as he might, Rand can never get the Manet-Mallarmé connection to work. Mallarmé achieved his Symbolist effects by the deft manipulation of language and poetic syntax. The individual words, their context, and the structure of a Mallarmé poem establish a heady, sensuous atmosphere that carries us far from the concrete, toward a realm of sensation, emotion, feeling. Manet’s choice of subjects, his handling of form and pictorial space—the materials of *his* art—do everything to focus on the here and now in the worlds of art and everyday life.

Rand is right to take note of the varied rhymes and oppositions between the two figures in Manet’s painting, to find significance in the artist’s having one figure look out of, the other into, the picture space. And he is right about the suppression of action, with its accompanying emphasis on inwardness and mood. Both elements suggest stirrings of what could at the very most be termed *proto*-Symbolism.

But he goes too far, and in the process of over-interpreting overlooks some more prosaic iconographic facts. He notices that Victorine’s black neck ribbon is a carry-over from *Olympia*, and that Suzanne wears a

similar one in her hair, but he doesn’t go anywhere with these ideas. The recurring black ribbon on Victorine suggests an interest in *self*-quotation in Manet (as did the Zola portrait). But does the ribbon then mean Victorine is still a courtesan, as she was in *Olympia*? And where does the child fit into this (grim) scenario if the black ribbon now symbolizes easy virtue? Rand never addresses these questions, or what significance there might be in the bangle Victorine wears; it, too, appeared in *Olympia*, by way of Titian.

Noticing certain things, he passes over others, such as the likelihood that *Las Meninas*, rather than Annunciations, served as the compositional precedent for Manet’s painting. (Both Velásquez and Manet use an outward-looking figure to anchor a larger composition.) In addition, he ignores the long history of the woman-and-book image in art. The open book traditionally allowed artists to depict a woman “reading,” a socially acceptable activity, while also staring at a man, whether he was a figure in the picture or the viewer himself. The whole image thus offered a cover for a look that would otherwise be understood as a come-on, something much less socially acceptable and in any case a far cry from the Virgin of Humility.

Most of us look at a painting and see an image as rigidly bounded conceptually as it is physically. Not Harry Rand. By seeing so many meanings in every detail of Manet’s picture, Rand tells us that those boundaries don’t matter, that a painting can mean practically anything. Speculation, for most art historians a perilous trapdoor to be carefully avoided, is a springboard for Rand. He uses it to ascend to ever greater heights of interpretive fancy. Along the way, though, he loses sight of just what sort of object he’s looking at. One moment his picture is a static icon ripe for exegesis, the next moment a movie still pregnant with implications of past, present, and future action. In losing touch with the picture, Rand loses touch with his own audience, and with the painter as well.

Stone v. Socrates

I. F. Stone The Trial of Socrates.
Little, Brown, 267 pages, \$18.95

reviewed by David Gress

I. F. Stone, the left-wing journalist and castigator of what he considers the repressive nature of modern American democracy, has for many years been fascinated by the ancient Greeks. He taught himself classical Greek with considerable success and acquired a broad if erratic knowledge of the classical literature. As a former classicist who tries to maintain at least a nodding familiarity with the directions of scholarship on the central questions of Greek and Roman history, I welcome Stone's latest book as evidence that there are still some people outside the academy who regard the great issues of classical civilization as being relevant to us. Unfortunately, it also seems to me that Stone is wrong: wrong about Socrates, wrong about Athenian democracy, and wrong about what kind of democracy is best.

Stone wrote his book to answer the following question: Did the Athenians have just cause for putting Socrates to death for impiety in 399 B.C.? He argues that they had reason to punish Socrates—not for impiety, but for corrupting Athenian youth with anti-democratic opinions. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates himself rejects the official indictment (it reads: "Socrates does not honor the gods that the city honors, but other new divinities instead") as a transparent cover for the real complaint against him, that of corrupting youth with undesirable opinions. Stone thus agrees with Socrates on the problem itself and provides, as it were, the unwritten brief for the prosecution. While condemning the death sentence as a violation of the freedom of speech otherwise honored in Athens, Stone argues that Socrates provoked the leaders of the Athenian democracy with his anti-democratic teachings. The philosopher, in Stone's view, enjoyed the free speech guaranteed by democracy but responded to this good fortune

with disdain and contempt. In short, he abused his civil rights to teach an elite group of intellectual youth that democracy, as the Athenians understood it, was a bad system of government, and that aristocracy—rule by the enlightened few—was better. Seduced in part by this teaching, groups of aristocrats seized power in 411 and 404 and instituted a repressive oligarchy. The first coup, that of the Four Hundred, took place in the aftermath of the disastrous Sicilian expedition of 415-413 which marked the beginning of the end of the Athenian empire. The second, that of the Thirty Tyrants, took place after Sparta had finally won the Peloponnesian War and occupied Athens. As Stone puts it, "the 'Socratified' youth . . . had become the storm troopers with which the Four Hundred in 411 and the Thirty in 404 terrorized the city." The Thirty had Sparta's protection and hoped to reshape the Athenian political system after the Spartan model. They were overthrown in 403, but they or a similar group were apparently plotting yet another coup in 401, which was foiled.

Socrates, who lived his whole life in Athens, did not, Stone believes, speak out against this repression as he should have done. On the contrary, he remained closely associated with several members of the oligarchy and showed no repentance for what they made of his teaching. It was therefore understandable, if not forgivable, that the democratic leaders, once restored to power, should want to silence Socrates lest his evil teaching lead to a fourth authoritarian coup.

From the day of his execution (probably in late 399) until modern educational reformers eradicated the memory of the entire event from the public mind, most people regarded Socrates as a martyr of philosophy, a victim of brutal prejudice and ignorance. In the nineteenth century a few progressive Victorian scholars tried to revise this judgment, arguing that the democrats did have a case against Socrates. This is the case that Stone has taken up. He thus joins the long line of debunkers of Western culture, in this case by showing that one of its heroes was the opposite of what most moderns have

held him to be: not a proponent of free thought and truth but a defender of reactionary and repressive oligarchy, an elitist snob, and a despiser of the values and tastes of the Athenian people. In Stone's view, we should respect those who accused Socrates and understand their anger while condemning their verdict. Athenian democracy, he believes, came closer to the ideal of direct rule by the people than any later effort, including that of modern America. Socrates and his disciples "saw the human community as a herd that had to be ruled by a king or kings, as sheep by a shepherd. The Athenians, on the other hand, believed—as Aristotle later said—that man was 'a political animal,' endowed like other animals with *logos*, or reason, and thus capable of distinguishing good from evil and of governing himself in a *polis*. This was no trivial difference."

Stone's indictment rests on three claims. First, Socrates believed in rule by an enlightened few or, even better, by a benevolent despot; he thus undermined Athenian democracy and was directly responsible, at least in part, for the anti-democratic coups of 411 and 404. Second, Athenian democracy was much better than its enemies—notably Socrates, Plato, and the historian Thucydides—would admit, so Socrates' contempt was groundless and unfair; indeed, the problems Athenian democracy faced were due to the machinations of its enemies and the bad teachings of Socrates, not to any inherent defects. Third, the Athenian type of egalitarian, majoritarian democracy (*sans* slavery and including women, of course) was and remains a valuable model. Stone emphasizes this last point in a recent book by Andrew Patner, *A Portrait of I. F. Stone*,¹ where he is quoted as saying that his ideal is "a communism without coercion, without cops," an ideal he found closely approximated in the *kibbutzim* of the early years of Israel. "You know," Stone says, "nobody got stuck as a bureaucrat in those colonies. All the officers were rotated." Rotation of office,

and appointment to office by lot rather than qualification, were also characteristic features of Athenian democracy in what Stone no doubt would call its most "democratic" phase, the second half of the fifth century.

Stone makes out that Socrates' political opinions were part of a long tradition of aristocratic prejudice going back to Homer. Socrates, far from transcending that prejudice by moving political philosophy to a higher level, is said to have merely refined it in the sophisticated terms of his own era.

This argument has many problems. One is that we do not really know what Socrates' political opinions were because our most important source for them is Plato, who had very definite opinions of his own. Scholars have argued for centuries over how far the character "Socrates" in Plato's dialogues represents the real Socrates. It would be easy to say that Stone's Socrates is in fact Plato's; and Plato, as we know, was a severe critic of the Athenian democracy. Nevertheless, I think we can go further.

One refutation of Stone's belief that Socrates was a reactionary in the aristocratic tradition is Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*. The dialogue is imaginary but the views of the characters appear, from external evidence, to represent faithfully views current in Athens during its most democratic phase. One of the characters is the rising young democratic politician Callicles. Now, if Stone is right, we should expect Callicles to argue that democracy is superior because rule by the people is just and fair to all, whereas Socrates' elitism is wrong because it seeks to impose the snobbish prejudices of aristocrats.

What do we in fact hear? Callicles has no time for sentimental talk about the wisdom of the people. Instead, he talks like a cross between a Reagan-era Wall Street operator and a Nietzschean superman. Democracy is good, he implies, because it allows every man to fight for himself and to get what he wants by deluding the masses. Laws, he says, are made by the weak to impose a slave morality on all, but the truly strong and charismatic leader will break out

¹ *A Portrait of I. F. Stone*, by Andrew Patner; Pantheon, 176 pages, \$15.95.

of bondage “like a lion’s cub” and trample on “paper prescriptions, spells, and charms,” making himself master of all by manipulation. (It is no surprise that Nietzsche found Callicles a captivating figure, from whom he borrowed not only the notion of a slave morality but the image of the strong man as a lion untamed by society.) Callicles ridicules Socrates, whose impractical way of life and unworldly meditation make him a sitting duck for democratic prejudice.

Callicles, in short, is the kind of leader a realist would expect to emerge in a system like Athens’, where those who had time to attend the Assembly had the absolute power of political decision and where the highest offices of state were filled by lot. The plebiscitarian Athenian democracy was, moreover, unable to put its immediate material interests aside for long-term advantage. In such a system of constant plebiscite only the manipulator will survive, because only he can adapt to the whims of the moment. In the words of the great English classicist E. R. Dodds, the Callicles type of manipulator is the end product of such a society, “which measures its ‘power’ by the number of ships in its harbours and of dollars in its treasury, its ‘well-being’ by the standard of living of its citizens.”² If such was the measure of a democracy, then Socrates was anti-democratic, but so is Stone, who despises the alleged materialism of Americans.

In his opportunism and materialism, Callicles reminds us not only of the caricature of the Eighties yuppie but of the manipulators of the student movement of the Sixties. Such people pretended to love direct democracy but were in fact the worst enemies of the only kind of democracy able to resist them, namely the representative kind. It is no accident, as a Marxist would say, that Stone remains infatuated with the spirit of the Sixties: it was the spirit of Athenian democracy as he imagines it.

The character of Callicles throws an interesting sidelight on the continuity between

the Sixties and the Eighties of our own century by showing how the same deeply undemocratic traits provided success in both eras. The successful operator of the Sixties played on emotions about democracy and justice to secure power for a narrow elite and to protect the interests of America’s enemies abroad. The successful operator of the Eighties appeals to principles of unfettered individualism in the interests of an amoral pursuit of money. Given Stone’s romantic view of the Sixties, it is clear that he cannot accept this continuity: the rebels of the Sixties were good, whereas the operators of the Eighties are bad. If they are in fact two aspects of the same ugly phenomenon, Stone’s case for Athenian-type democracy falls to the ground, as does his case against Socrates, who spent much of his life warning that plebiscitarian democracy was likely to produce figures like Callicles.

Socrates was certainly no friend of the Athenian democracy as it appeared in his later years. Neither he, nor Plato, nor Thucydides, however, were enemies of democracy as such or unaware of the glory it had fostered before the war with Sparta. Socrates was no advocate of rule by a benevolent despot, nor did he make the mistake of identifying the rule of the wise as an ideal with the rule of a particular aristocratic faction. Even the Platonic Socrates of the *Republic* said only that *if* there existed a perfectly enlightened king *then* the world would see “an end to evils.” But since we all know (he continued) that such a marvel does not exist, the single ruler is more likely to be a despot than a hero. And the best protection against both kinds of despotism, that of the masses and that of the dictator, is the rule of law.

This is the subject of Plato’s *Crito*, a dialogue set in Socrates’ prison cell as he awaits execution. Socrates’ friends try to persuade him to escape. The philosopher refuses, since to escape would be to flout the law, which deserves absolute respect even when the individuals who represent the law commit an injustice. The law exists before the

2 See Plato’s *Gorgias*, edited by E. R. Dodds, Clarendon Press (1959), page 33.

individual, who is bound as it were by a contract to obey the law.

If Socrates had really been an enemy of democracy in the sense we moderns usually understand the word—as constitutional, representative government—that argument makes no sense. My point is precisely that Socrates was capable of a distinction that Stone refuses to make: the distinction between the ugly emotionalism of the plebiscitarian system (which reached its nadir in the modern world in Nazi Germany) and the rule of law. Stone finds in ancient Athens the image of the collectivist, egalitarian democracy he favors. That image excludes the constitutional and representative form of democracy still largely honored in most modern countries—the only kind that will not lead to tyranny by a narrow elite of self-appointed manipulators. Representative democracy, as Socrates would have agreed, depends on rules that are not arbitrary, that have their own reason and inner logic. Those rules must be general enough to permit the independent, free actions of numerous individuals while restraining those who would subvert the system. Socrates was the first thinker to formulate the idea of the rule of law and of the social contract, ideas that have yielded the modern concept of representative democracy as well as of the free market and economic liberty.

In a work which reads as a refutation of Stone's argument for plebiscitarian democracy, the economist and philosopher James Buchanan has pointed out the danger to modern democratic societies of forgetting the "reason of rules" and hankering after emotionally more satisfying, but politically more destructive, visions of justice.³ Buchanan's work is the latest in a long line of defenses of the argument that democracy is possible if guarded by the right rules, a line that began with the Socrates of the *Apology* and the *Crito* and continued with Aristotle (though not with Plato, who did not share his teacher's view on this point).

3 See *The Reason of Rules*, by James M. Buchanan and Gerald Brennan; Cambridge University Press (1985).

Stone's peculiar notion that Aristotle somehow refuted Socrates by being in favor of Athenian democracy is another conceit that will not resist examination. It assumes the Athenian democracy that Aristotle defended was identical with the plebiscitarian excesses represented by Callicles, which Socrates clearly condemned. The equation is false, and this leads me to my final point. Stone seems unaware of the burgeoning literature now arguing that there was a substantial change in the character and procedures of Athenian democracy in the years after Sparta's victory in the Peloponnesian War.

Two recent works concern us in criticizing Stone's book. One, by Martin Ostwald, an elder statesman of the discipline, concludes that soon after Socrates' trial and execution Athenian leaders took his advice and subordinated the plebiscitarian system to the rule of law, and that this change permitted Athens to survive until final conquest by the Macedonians in 338.⁴ The other, by the young Hellenist Barry Strauss, argues that the plebiscitarian system was weakened simply because many of its most avid supporters in the poorer classes had died in the war.⁵ Strauss comes to the astonishing and horrifying conclusion that Athens lost over half her male citizen population in the Peloponnesian War, declining from 40,000 full citizens in 434 to about 15,000 in 404. Whether Stone is right in his general argument or not, clearly a bloodletting of this magnitude produced social and psychological dislocations that in themselves might explain the anti-democratic coups for which he is eager to blame Socrates. The demographic collapse may also explain Socrates' concern with the rule of law, a concern he apparently shared with many of his fellow Athenians.

4 *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law*, by Martin Ostwald; University of California Press, 663 pages, \$75.

5 *Athens after the Peloponnesian War: Class, Faction and Policy*, by Barry S. Strauss; Cornell University Press, 191 pages, \$29.95.

Stone misunderstands both Socrates and Athenian democracy. He does so because he politicizes the past and the study of the past and seeks to use the case of Socrates to discredit American representative democracy. One of his pet peeves about modern America is its foolishness abroad and injustice at home. He does not like the Americans who elected Ronald Reagan (twice!) and who believe, at least intermittently, in America's right to survive and to defend itself. For him, America's democracy is potentially as violent and repressive as the system that Socrates' oligarchical disciples supposedly preferred. Like many other leftists, Stone absurdly overrates America's power: "It's very easy for us to change Russia for the worse," he says to Andrew Patner. "If we don't come to an arms agreement and stop this crazy arms race, the Russians will tighten up at home, and we will here . . . We're getting Sovietized in this country."

There is an important book waiting to be written on Athens and Socrates and the lessons people have drawn from their clash

through the ages, but Stone's is not it. His vision of democracy (and hence his vision of Socrates) is the vision of Jesse Jackson, a vision that sees enemies of the people everywhere at home and nowhere abroad, and that seeks to replace the rule of law with the rule of accident and emotion. Jackson, in fact, is the contemporary equivalent of Callicles the manipulator. According to Plato himself in the *Republic*, Callicles' type is that of the "tyrannical man" who, as E. R. Dodds wrote, is "at once a product of democracy and its deadliest enemy."

The true enemy of democracy is not Socrates, against whom Stone wrote his book, but Callicles and his numerous later imitators up to the present who use the tools given them by an irresponsible democracy to bring about its destruction. The final irony in Stone's view is that because of his political vision of democracy as perpetual plebiscite he can never admit that he supports what he professes to abhor: an uncontrolled despotism "for the good of the people," sanctioned by daily acclamation.

Salinger redux

by Bruce Bawer

In the August 1986 issue of *Vogue*, the respected British writer Ian Hamilton chatted with an interviewer about his book *J. D. Salinger: A Writing Life*, an unauthorized biography of the legendary novelist which was due to be published that month. His fascination with Salinger, Hamilton explained, dated back to his youth, when he'd fallen in love with *The Catcher in the Rye*; it had been unexpectedly reawakened one day when his sixteen-year-old son came home excited about a "wonderful book" he'd been reading at school: it was, of course, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Though Salinger himself (whom Hamilton did not know personally) had proven to be a good deal less lovable than his celebrated novel, Hamilton found that his sympathy for the author had increased, rather than diminished, over the course of his researches. "I would love to know what he thinks of this account," Hamilton said.

By the time that issue of *Vogue* hit the stands, Hamilton had his wish. Late in May of that year, having seen bound galleys of Hamilton's book, Salinger spoke out loudly—through his lawyers, who complained to Hamilton's publisher, Random House, that the book's extensive use of Salinger's unpublished correspondence exceeded legal "fair use" guidelines and constituted a violation of his copyright and an invasion of his privacy. Though Hamilton quickly revised the book, substituting paraphrase for direct quotation from the letters in many cases,

this solution did not satisfy Salinger: in October he sued Random House and Hamilton to enjoin publication, and a temporary restraining order was issued. A month later, a judge found in favor of the defendants, but on appeal the decision was reversed. Over the next few months, petitions by Random House for reconsideration by the U.S. Court of Appeals and for review by the Supreme Court were denied; in effect, *J. D. Salinger: A Writing Life* was dead.

Or so it seemed. Then, on February 19, 1988, Random House issued a press release which began as follows:

In response to J. D. Salinger's legal actions to stop publication of Ian Hamilton's 1986 biography *J. D. Salinger: A Writing Life*, Mr. Hamilton has written a substantially new book about the reclusive author which Random House will publish in May 1988.

The new book, titled *In Search of J. D. Salinger*, tells the dual story of Salinger's literary life and Hamilton's vexed and now much-discussed adventure in pursuing it as Salinger's biographer.

The press release went on to quote Hamilton on "both books":

The first version was a fairly conventional biography, connecting the work to what could be discovered of the life. Well worth doing, but perhaps constrained by my not knowing for certain how much of the material I'd dis-

covered could be used. The new version is a different sort of book altogether—more of a literary adventure story, with the biographer as a leading character. It has a stronger plot and certainly a more riveting denouement; and, at the same time, it raises key questions about the whole business of “biography”—what it is for, why do we write it, why do people want to read it and so on. Also, it tells you just as much about Salinger—in fact, more—than the earlier, banned, version did.

Also quoted in the press release was Jason Epstein, editorial director of Random House, who said that while he “regret[ed] the controversy that has arisen from this project,” the result of the controversy would be the publication by Random House of “an even better book than Mr. Hamilton had originally written.”

Well! The merits or weaknesses of Hamilton’s book notwithstanding, this press release was certainly a work of art, accomplishing with wonderful style and audacity everything that the situation called for. It completely smoothed over the fact, for one thing, that the total elapsed time between the Supreme Court’s final deathblow to the “first book” and Random House’s triumphal announcement of the “second book” was only four and a half months—an awfully brief period for a busy man like Hamilton to write something “substantially new.” What’s more, the press release all but thanked Salinger for doing Hamilton and Random House a favor by suppressing the first book—because the second one would be so much *better*.

In truth, Salinger probably *has* done Hamilton and Random House a good turn. Because of the two years of publicity that have been attendant upon the court case, *In Search of J. D. Salinger* will probably sell many more copies than its previous incarnation would have sold. But is it really (as Epstein claims) “a better book”? Is it even (in Hamilton’s words) “a different sort of book altogether”? As someone who read the earlier version in galleys—and who, in fact, commented upon it in a longish essay on

Salinger’s life and work (“Salinger’s Arrested Development,” *The New Criterion*, September 1986)—I’d have to answer both questions in the negative.

This is not to suggest that the first version of Hamilton’s book was a masterpiece. On the contrary, as I observed at the time, the book was in reality not a biography but a “para-biography”: Hamilton had simply not been able to collect enough material to write a full-fledged life. Though crowded with gratuitous trivia—with endless quotations, for instance, from Salinger’s military-school yearbook and college newspaper—the book lacked illuminating detail: Salinger the man never truly came into focus. Nor did it help that the book covered only the years 1935 to 1965 (“the span of Salinger’s ‘public’ career”) or that it was less than splendidly written, its generally lucid prose marred by astonishing grammatical errors and inexplicable tense shifts. On most scores, in short, *J. D. Salinger: A Writing Life* represented a decided failure in the art of biography.

If there is one major difference between the two versions of Hamilton’s book, it is that the second version—similar though it is to the first—does not pretend to be a biography. Indeed, Hamilton even admits in these pages—and quite cheerfully, too—that the first version, touted by Random House as a “brilliant” and “remarkable” example of the genre, was not in fact a biography at all. “To people who asked me about it at this stage [i.e., in the months before the lawsuit], I’d tend to say, ‘It isn’t much. Don’t get the idea that it’s a *biography*, because it isn’t. But it’s not too bad.’”

Honest as he is now about the flaws of that first version, however, Hamilton is less than straightforward about its successor. For if the earlier text did not add up to the “biography” it purported to be, neither does the new version of the book fit Hamilton’s description of it. Far from being a strongly plotted “literary adventure story” or a thoughtful inquiry into the nature and purpose of biography, as he would have us believe, Version Two is pretty much the

original book with the Salinger quotations and paraphrases removed, and their place taken up by an extraordinary amount of pointless first-person blather.

For instance, whereas the first version of the book dove right into Salinger's childhood, the new version begins by telling us at some length about Hamilton himself—his youthful love of *The Catcher in the Rye*, his early biographical research, and his very brief correspondence with Salinger (who, after receiving a letter of inquiry from Hamilton, wrote back asking to be left alone). Hamilton describes the "ground rules" he set up for himself at the start: "Since up to 1965, he [Salinger] had been in the public domain, but thereafter had elected not to be, I would not pursue my researches beyond that date. I would also undertake not to bother his family and friends."

These rules strike one as odd: considering that the very act of writing such a book represents, to Salinger's way of thinking, an intolerable intrusion, Hamilton's supposedly principled decision not to investigate the writer's last twenty years or so, or to attempt to interview his family and friends, is baffling. Indeed, at times one is tempted to conclude that Hamilton's decision had less to do with his sensitivity and scruples than with his desire to limit his research. If these rules strike one as odd in the abstract, moreover, they seem even odder when Hamilton gets around to applying them. Midway through the book, for instance, he explains that he refrained from hunting down Salinger's first wife because he didn't want to "tear open some old wounds"; elsewhere he claims that he chose not to seek out any of the now-middle-aged folks who, as teenagers, had been befriended by Salinger upon his removal to Cornish, Connecticut, because "the rules of trespass" that he'd set for himself stipulated that he "was not to go within a hundred yards of Cornish." One can conclude only that Hamilton draws some mighty strange lines: if he's so reluctant to disturb people, for heaven's sake, then why write about Salinger at all?

In Chapter One, Hamilton writes that in November 1983, "I set off for New York—or we did: me grappling feebly with the moral issues and my biographizing alter ego, now my constant companion, merely eager to get on with the job." Throughout the remainder of the book Hamilton persists in making use of this most peculiar (and eventually quite irritating) rhetorical device, consistently identifying himself with that portion of his consciousness that took a sensitive and principled view of his biographical researches, and distancing himself from that portion which went pragmatically and indelicately about the whole business. (This cynical device, one should note, is consistent with Hamilton's tendency, throughout the book, toward slick self-exculpation and self-serving rationalization.) Sandwiched between the various chunks of pseudo-biography, accordingly, are numerous lengthy passages very much like the following:

We [i.e., Hamilton and his "biographizing alter ego"] traveled back from Valley Forge to New York feeling triumphant. Look at what had been amassed, so far: Salinger's school records, some telling items of juvenilia, frank testimony from contemporaries, some eyewitness location stuff from us, and so on. Material any biographer would have reason to be proud of, you'd have thought. And, sure enough, my companion now had a smug, workmanlike look about him—as if, no matter what the theoretical problems attaching to this case might be, he had journeyed with efficiency across the uncomplaining fields of fact. He'd done his job. He had his Chapter One.

But what, I wanted to ask him, had we actually achieved? So Salinger was bad at arithmetic: *All* writers are bad at arithmetic. He was sardonic, moody, a bit of an outsider: Again, what writer isn't all these things, when young? We had some fresh data, to be sure, but how close had we really come to conjuring anything distinctive? Did we think we now knew Salinger any better than before? And when we made connections between the "man of mystery" we're in pursuit of and the juvenile's love of play acting, were we not simply bending the

material to suit our plot? We still didn't have any close-ups, any illuminating mini-narratives. Would we have liked that boy if we had known him then? We didn't know.

Hamilton meanders along in this vein for another page or so, to no appreciable purpose and toward no apparent conclusion; though the question marks pile up, no answers ever materialize.

Nor do the two stories told side-by-side in this book—that of Salinger's life, and that of Hamilton's researches—ever come together in any significant way. One can imagine a book which prepared a context wherein the climactic event—Salinger's lawsuit against Hamilton and Random House—would be experienced by the reader as a symbolic apotheosis of sorts, a convergence of the twain, a culminating act that illuminated both the biographical subject's life and the biographer's quest. But this isn't that book. Superficial, talky, and overly detailed, a thing of petty gripes and petty sarcasm, Hamilton's account of the lawsuit reads as if it was written in haste and anger—and with, above all, an eye to padding out the manuscript.

For all his vaunted sensitivity regarding Salinger's rights, moreover, Hamilton comes across in these concluding pages as not only rather hardhearted but also somewhat obtuse, especially in the matter of copyrights. At one point, for instance, he suggests—quite untenably, it seems to me—that Salinger's resolve never to publish his letters essentially deprives him of the right to prohibit their publication by others. Elsewhere, Hamilton (or, rather, his “companion”) finds it paradoxical that while the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas owned the Salinger letters as physical objects, Salinger himself owned the copyright. Though the distinction appears sensible enough, Hamilton's “companion” cannot make sense of it: if Salinger denied him the right to quote or paraphrase, “then what was the point of my being allowed to see the stuff at all? What was the point, really, of it *being there*?” Well, Mr. Hamilton, here's an analogy: let's say I

buy a copy of your book *Robert Lowell*. The words remain yours, but the book itself belongs to me, and just as your ownership of the words doesn't permit you to come into my apartment and take the book away, so my ownership of the book doesn't give me the right to reproduce it *in toto* on a xerox machine and sell copies. Get it?

To criticize Hamilton for his opacity about such questions, of course, is not to suggest that the suppression of *J. D. Salinger: A Writing Life* was a good thing. On the contrary, every critic and biographer who has written at book length about a living or recently deceased American writer knows all too well that the nation's copyright statutes need to be reformed. Under the current system, biographers and critics—who must quote from texts in order to support arguments about them or their authors—are not distinguished from anthologists, who reprint works in their entirety in order to turn a profit from someone else's creative labors; thanks to the law's inexplicable disregard for this crucial distinction, authors (or their executors) are free to give sympathetic critics carte blanche to quote extensively from their work, and at the same time are able to forbid not-so-sympathetic critics to quote from their work beyond the vaguely defined boundaries of “fair use.” (Alternatively, authors can charge outrageous fees in exchange for permission to quote.)

Although copyright laws exist not to shield authors from critics or biographers, but to protect them from (or provide for compensation for) a loss of their work's reprint value, many authors do, in fact, make routine use of these laws to silence adverse commentary on their work and to deflect prying eyes. To my mind, since partial quotation of a piece of writing in a critical or biographical context does not harm its reprint value but, rather, tends to enhance it—on the principle that the more that is written about a writer, the greater will be the public interest in his work—there is no excuse for the extensive degree to which copyright-related restrictions are currently

placed upon serious critics and biographers. The law, as it stands, only encourages the proliferation of sycophantic biographers and critics *manqué* and inhibits honest, plain-spoken biography and criticism of the sort that our literary culture, at present, desperately requires; under such circumstances, the Appeals Court decision in the Salinger case cannot be viewed as anything but an unfortunate precedent.

That the Appeals Court managed to arrive at such a wrongheaded verdict in the Salinger case, and that the important issues I've mentioned were so woefully obscured, may well have much to do with the mediocrity of the book in question. For though a book, under the law, should not have to be a *good* book in order to be safe from unfair litigation, I suspect that if the first version of Hamilton's portrait had been a more substantial piece of work—on a par, say, with Richard Ellmann's life of Joyce—the Appeals Court judges would have been a great deal more reluctant to bar its publication, and might well have been less likely to rule for the plaintiff.

Thus, while one sorely laments the fact that an American court made use of the copyright law to prevent the publication of Hamilton's book, one does not grieve overmuch for either him or Random House. Wrong though the Appeals Court was to decide in Salinger's favor, he did, after all, have an understandable gripe: the first version of Hamilton's book was a document of little biographical or critical value, and whatever modest curiosity value it possessed did rely, to a considerable extent, upon its use of quotations from Salinger's unpublished private correspondence. As for the second, newly published version of the book, the important fact is not that it lacks this curiosity value (though it does), or that Hamilton has padded it out with an inane personal narrative (though he has); but rather that, like its earlier incarnation, it is a remarkably flimsy and pointless specimen of literary portraiture—meager sustenance indeed for the generations of readers who, perplexed by J.D. Salinger and his bizarre oeuvre, sincerely hunger for real enlightenment. The search goes on.



Paul Klee, *Galgenhumor*, 1919

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